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"LUCK, PARDS, AND A GOOD-NIGHT TO YE," CRIED JACK NELSON, WHILE THE DEAD-SHOT NINE DASHED OVER THE PRAIRIE.

The Dead Shot Nine; OR, MY PARDS OF THE PLAINS.

BY HON. WM. F. CODY,
("BUFFALO BILL.")

CHAPTER I.

AN APPEAL AND A RESPONSE.

"MY DEAR BUFFALO BILL:—

"Pardon me if I so address you, calling you by the name which you have made famous, for it is to you in your character as a borderman, as a scout, that I appeal for aid in this my hour of almost despair, and wholly in despair would I be but for the faith that you can save me from worse than death.

"Do you recall, Buffalo Bill, one night during the civil war, when you came to my home, in the Sunny South, and asked for shelter and help, for you had been wounded severely?

"I was but a girl then of thirteen years, and you gave to me a locket containing two likenesses, one of myself, the other of my boy hero, my sweetheart, who six months before, though only sixteen, had gone to fight under the Bonnie Blue Flag.

"You told me how you had found him upon the red field of Shiloh, dying from a wound in his side, and, doing all you could for him, though you wore the blue and he the gray, he gave into your keeping the locket, some letters of mine, his watch and chain, and bade you bear them to me, if ever in your power so to do.

"You told me that you had buried him where he fell, and had marked the grave, and that you had dared come into our lines to keep your pledge to him.

"You had been seen by Confederate soldiers, had been fired on and wounded, but you escaped and reached my home.

"My father and two brothers were away in the Confederate army, and my mother and myself were alone on the plantation with the slaves.

"Mother was ill, so I saw you alone, my old negro nurse dressed your wound, and I heard from you the sad story of my boy lover's death upon the field of battle.

"Suddenly a party of Confederate cavalry dashed up to the house, having tracked you there, believing you to be a spy and with intention to hang you as such.

"Those were bitter, cruel days, Buffalo Bill, and you knew your life would have been the forfeit, and you were determined to die bravely, weapons in hand.

"Do you remember then that I saved you? That I told the commanding officer, whom I knew well, a falsehood, without the quiver of a muscle or blush of shame?

"Do you recall that I told him you were a Confederate soldier, wearing the blue uniform because you had escaped from prison in the North, and you had come by my home to bring me the letters and trinkets sent by my boy lover who had died by your side?

"They believed me, Buffalo Bill, and you were spared, and three days after you returned safely into your lines, telling me before you departed that I had saved you from the death of a spy, and bidding me, did I ever need aid, to send or come to you.

"I do need aid now, for the war ended with my father and brothers dead, and my mother and myself, almost ruined in fortune, were forced to seek a new home with a relative in Kansas.

"One whom I knew when in my girlhood, one whom I never loved went to the bad, became a guerrilla, warring upon North and South alike, and when I came to Kansas, outlawed as he was in his State, he followed me, urging that I should become his wife, vile as I believe him to be.

"He holds secrets of our family, and so had the power to force me into an engagement with him, and now he threatens to come here ten days hence, and, accompanied by a minister, force me to become his wife.

"I and those about me are powerless to prevent him, for he dares us to do our worst, and he has the power to make us cringe before him; but this morning my little cousin, Bradford Buckner, said to me, and his words fell like prophecy upon me:

"Cousin Belle, Buffalo Bill could save you if he was here!

"I started, fairly trembled at the words of the boy, and rushing to my room, I am writing this letter to you.

"Your name has come to me often as a scout of the border, and I have longed to see you again; but you are little Brad's hero, and his words caused me to remember your pledge, and now I ask you to save me from the fate that I am to be forced to meet.

"To be truthful with you, Buffalo Bill, I love another, the elder brother of my boy soldier lover and so like him, and so noble; but he is far from me now, and, with the power of a family secret over me, this man, this outlaw—Captain

Kent Kennard—is going to force me to marry him.

"Save me, Buffalo Bill, for I believe little Bradford's words are prophetic and that you can do so.

"Waiting, hoping, before utterly despairing, I am Your friend,

"BELLE BRADFORD."

The foregoing letter, kind reader, was handed to me by a scout nearly twenty years ago.

At the time I was Captain of Scouts to the army, and our force was stationed upon the far frontier, where we had hard work to keep the red-men in check, and the lives of us all were in daily deadly peril.

I had just been ordered on a special duty, scouting service alone, and upon which much depended, and I dared not disobey orders.

It would consume perhaps a month of my time, and this letter demanded instant attention, for the limit was ten days from the writing, and it was some distance to the place from whence it had been written.

I sought the courier who had brought it, and asked:

"Jack, was this letter given to you personally?"

"Yes, and by the purtiest gal I ever seen, Bill, fer she hed great big blue eyes, and a mouth that looked like a red rose full o' pearls, so rosy was her lips and so white her teeth."

"Jack, I fear you fell in love with the lady," I answered, amused at his description.

"I'm clean gone, Bill, clean gone; but she looked so sad, and was so dreadful in earnest she offered me one hundred dollars to carry the letter.

"But I wouldn't take her money, Bill, but told her I were coming right here to your camp, which were a lie, for I wasn't, you know, being guidin' on the lower trails, and I told her as how I'd give it to you myself, and I has kept my word."

"You are a noble fellow, Jack, and you will not lose by your good act; but tell me, do you know anything about the young lady?"

"Not much, Bill, for they is strangers from the South, I has heard, and lives on a half ranch, half farm, down in Kansas, I believe, with a brother of the girl's mother."

"Do you know anything about Captain Kent Kennard, Jack?"

"Bill, that's the strangeness of it, for I has heard that Cap'n Kent, as they calls him, has been seen visitin' the Buckner Ranch, whar the girl lives."

"He is a bad citizen, I believe, Jack?"

"Bad citizen, Bill? Now you do draw it mild!

"Why, thet Kent Kennard are the wu'st man in Kansas, to my thinkin', though he pertends honest.

"He hes a ranch thar, and as I said pertends ter be a good man; but ef he hain't one o' ther Kansas Red Owls in secret, I'll eat my spurs."

"And the Red Owls are a bad lot, Jack?"

"They is kin to Satan, every one of 'em, Bill; but the band is so secret in all its doings nobody knows if they is white or black, Injun or Chinee, only they makes themselves felt all the time, and I suspects Kent Kennard o' bein' a Red Owl.

"Anyhow, he takes occasion to tarn a man's toes up when he goes to town now and then, is a doubly sart'in dead shot, can outride a Texas saddle strapped on, knows how to toss a knife to center, and to use it at close range, and is just as hadsome as a pictur'.

"That's the man, Bill, and don't deceive yerself that he hain't no terror, fer he is, and with deviltry to sell."

"Jack, what are you doing now?"

"Guiding trains, trappin' when pelts is prime, and scoutin' a leetle, Bill."

"I wish to offer you service, Jack."

"Call me, Bill, and I tarns up with a full hand.

"I'm yours ter throw to ther crows, ef yer says it."

"Jack, I wish you to consider yourself in my service, at a scout's pay, and your first duty will be to take a letter back to the lady who gave you this one for me, Miss Belle Bradford."

"I'll do it, Bill."

I told Jack to be ready to start at dawn, and to come to my camp that night for the letter, after which I went to my tent and wrote a response to the earnest appeal I had received from one who had indeed saved my life in war days, little girl though she was.

In my response I told her that stern duty, such as hedged in the soldier and the scout, forced me away; but into the hands of those who were my Prairie Pard, men whom I could trust as my right hand would my left, I gave the duty of saving her from the fate she dreaded, and it would be their duty to see that Captain Kent Kennard would no longer shadow her life.

This letter sent, I rode over to the camp of those to whom I intrusted the carrying out of my wishes, well knowing, without asking them, what would be their response.

Had it been an official duty I could have ordered, and they would have obeyed; but with

an outside affair I could but ask, and yet I knew the gallant men but too well to dread refusal.

Most of them have gone across the Dark River, and others no longer follow the red trails over prairie, mountain and valley; but true as steel, their work was well done, and, rest they in their graves, or dwell they in camp, or in city, may Heaven bless them, my noble Pard of the Plains.

With this introduction, I give their work on the red trails in this romance of The Dead Shot Nine.

CHAPTER II.

THE MEETING OF THE NINE.

A BIVOUAC of bordermen, in a lovely valley, meets the eye of the reader.

A camp pleasantly situated upon the sloping hillside, that terminates upon the bank of a clear, swiftly-flowing stream.

Not the white tents of the soldiers, seen in the distance on the hill-top are visible here, but instead the pointed *teepee* of the red-skin, with its skin walls oddly painted with various hieroglyphics that an Indian alone could master with his untutored hand.

Two fires are glowing bright, and about them are the scouts, sitting, awaiting their evening meal, which is being prepared by two negroes, dressed in half uniform, half buckskin, and seemingly enjoying their free-and-easy life upon the plains.

Their kitchen utensils are few, a skillet, a frying-pan, an oven or two, some coffee-pots, and tin plates, cups and rude knives, forks and spoons of iron.

In the background stands a large wagon, with four mules lariatied out near, and into this stout vehicle the entire outfit of the scouts' camp can be placed when on the march, for little do these bold prairie rovers care for the comforts which soldiers so much enjoy.

Upon a meadow not far away half a hundred horses are feeding, and wiry, splendid animals they are, showing speed in their build and possessing endurance equal to their riders.

Texan and Mexican saddles and bridles hang upon the trees near, some of them glistening with fancy ornaments, and heavy with odd accouterments, while resting upon logs and leaning against trees are the repeating-rifles of this border band of heroes.

The men who make up the humanity of this outfit are some three-score in number, and superb specimens they are of manhood in all its physical beauty.

To a man, almost, they wear their hair long, falling upon their broad shoulders, their forms are wiry, muscular and powerful, their movements quick and decided, and their faces are as brown as exposure to the elements can make them.

Their general attire consists of flannel hunting-shirts, buckskin leggings, a slouch hat with huge brim, and a hunting-jacket of some kind, though several are dressed in a more picturesque costume, some of them being a mixture of uniform, buckskin and the Mexican garb.

In each case they are armed with a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife, while their trusty rifle is not far away, and the heels of all are adorned with spurs.

A picturesque, wild-looking, daring set of men they are, relying upon themselves because they know their strength, ready to do and dare anything against enormous odds, true as steel to friend and foe, men who have been reared upon the wild frontier, who have taken life and faced death in its worst forms, who know the prairies as one knows his own home, and who, night or day, can follow trails that a red-skin would falter at.

Such is the camp of the army scouts into which I would have the reader accompany me, following upon the trail of a horseman who rides slowly up the valley, the form of horse and rider distinctly revealed in the light of the setting sun.

A man of almost giant form, with great broad shoulders, a fine head well-poised, an athletic stature, and a face singularly striking in its calm power of expression and resolute courage.

A dark mustache, the ends worn long and drooping, but half hides the determined mouth, and his eyes are piercing and restless.

His hair is black and worn very long, hanging below his shoulders.

At his back is slung a repeating-rifle, about his waist is a belt-of-arms and his dress is a mixture of army blue and buckskin, while he wears cavalry boots, gold spurs, and has a gold cord about his black sombrero.

The horse seems well suited to the man, being a gaunt, long-bodied, powerful animal, decked out with a Mexican saddle and bridle with silver enough on them to tempt a road-agent's honesty.

"Boys, there comes Wild Bill!"

"Now we'll know if it's a move or remain here in camp," cried a voice in the bivouac, as the horseman was seen approaching.

* J. B. Hinkok, killed at Deadwood by an assassin some years ago.—THE AUTHOR.

And he raised his hat as the scouts greeted him with a yell of welcome.

Dismounting, he knotted his reins so that his horse could feed and advanced with the quick, firm step of a soldier to the nearest camp-fire, around which the scouts all gathered.

"Well, Bill, what's up, for you are just down from head-quarters, ain't you?" said one.

"Yes, pard; I'm just from camp, for you know Buffalo Bill sent for me this afternoon, and there's a little work on hand," said Wild Bill.

"I thought there was music to be sung when the courier said Buffalo Bill wanted you right away."

"Yes; but it is not an army trick we are to take now, for the general has sent Buffalo Bill off on a few weeks' trip of reconnoitering to find out just what is the best move to make, and you are to remain in camp, all except eight pards whom I need to go with me on a secret service expedition."

"We'll all go to the war
You bet! you bet!
We'll all go to the war!"

sung half a dozen voices in chorus.

"No, pard; I can only take eight of you, and you, Tom Sun, I leave in command of the outfit, with Bony Ernest as second, for, Texas Jack, you go with me, as do you also, Frank Powell, for, if I'm not mistaken, we'll need a surgeon," and Wild Bill addressed two of the party whose appearance was striking in the extreme.

Texas Jack* was a sunny-faced Texan, who had fought for the Bonnie Blue Flag during the war, and afterward drifted into the northern frontier.

A man of reckless courage, the activity of a cat and strength of a giant, added to which was his deadly aim with the revolver, and perfect knowledge of trailing, he was one to dread as a foe and seek as a friend.

The other, Frank Powell,† was a man with a history, and a remarkable one, for he had been an army surgeon, and gave it up for the wild, free life of the scouts, being the "Medicine Man" of the border outfit.

A man of desperate pluck, with few equals and no superior in strength and endurance, a face strangely handsome, which his long, black, waving hair and black eyes made almost weird-like, he had the refined manner of a city-bred gentleman, and the gentleness of a woman, while his voice was low-toned and full of harmony.

He was attired in an undress uniform, which fitted his superb form well, top cavalry boots, with Mexican spurs, a black sombrero encircled by a gold cord, and his belt of arms were silver-mounted and of the very best.

"Night Hawk George, and you, Broncho Billy,‡ I wish to go with me," said Wild Bill, and glancing slowly over the faces in front of him, he continued:

"And you, Dandy Dick, also you, Bravo Buck, Dashing Dan and Fighting Frank,§ I wish to go with me."

"Pard Bill, you has jist got the Nine Dead Shots o' this lay-out," said one of the scouts, glancing over the nine men ranged alongside of Wild Bill, and with Frank North at the other end, tall, straight as an arrow, eagle-eyed, determined-faced, and presenting the contrast by having short hair.

They were a splendid set of men, that Dead Shot Nine, and certainly the pick of the three-score of noble fellows in the border bivouac.

"I meant to pick out the dead shots, Nick, and I have got them, unless some one backs out when he knows the work to be done is secret, and may be desperate."

"What say you, pards, does any man of you eight wish to step out of line?"

The silence that followed was an impressive answer to the question of Wild Bill, and with a grim smile he said:

"I thank you, boys; I knew you well when I picked you out."

* J. B. Omohundro died at Leadville, Colorado, a few years since.—THE AUTHOR.

† Doctor Frank Powell, late surgeon of the U. S. Army, and who has won fame as a plainsman, known on the border through his many exploits, as "White Beaver," "Fancy Frank," "The Magic Doctor," "The Dead Shot Doctor," etc. Now Medicine Chief of the Winnebago Indians, and practicing medicine in La Crosse, Wisconsin, of which city he is mayor.—THE AUTHOR.

‡ Night Hawk George—Doctor George Powell—now a practicing physician in the Far West, then a famous scout and guide. Broncho Billy, Doctor William Powell, also metamorphosed from a plainsman into a physician. These two are brothers of Doctor Frank Powell, who will be known in this romance as "White Beaver."—THE AUTHOR.

§ All four were well-known bordermen years ago, the three first named having been killed in battle, and the latter, Fighting Frank, being Major Frank North, of the U. S. Army, and who commanded a regiment of Pawnee Indians for years, organizing them from the tribe that made him their white chief. Than Frank North no truer, braver man ever lived, and his name and deeds will ever live in song and story of the plains. He died a few months ago from the effects of old wounds.—THE AUTHOR.

"Now let us have supper, and then take the trail, for we have no time to lose."

An hour after the Dead Shot Nine rode out of camp, thoroughly armed, splendidly mounted, and equipped to fulfill for me the pledge that I made to Belle Bradford, the brave Southern girl who had saved me from being hanged as a Union spy.

Without a word, or a question, my gallant comrades followed their leader, Wild Bill, to whom I had told my wishes and intrusted the fulfillment of my pledge.

CHAPTER III.

THE OATH OF THE DEAD SHOT NINE.

HAVING had a consultation with General Carr, as to just what duty he wished me to go upon, I rode out of the head-quarters camp just as the full moon was rising above the prairie horizon.

It was a dangerous mission that I was bound upon, and alone, my thoughts wandered strangely to the past and anticipations of the future, while I wondered if my fair friend, Belle Bradford, would be content to have others keep my pledge in my stead.

My trail lay southward for a while, and then crossing a prairie stream branched off toward the great Northwest into which the white man had seldom ventured.

I had intrusted to Wild Bill the keeping of my pledge, and I knew that it would be well done, and felt that he was then moving southward with his gallant comrades.

But suddenly my horse gave a low snort, and I knew that others were abroad on the plains, as the animal never played me false.

A short distance ahead was the tree-fringed bank of the stream, and within its shadows there certainly lurked some one or something to cause my horse to give that alarm, and his ears were pricked up as he slowly went on his way.

My rifle was ready for use, as were also my revolvers, and I was not to be caught off my guard, though I did not like the idea of a shot from ambush.

The moon shone with rare beauty, and I was relieved against the sky with marvelous distinctness I well knew; but my duty called me on, and on I must go.

As I rode forward my horse grew more and more uneasy, and I was thinking of approaching the stream at another point, to reconnoiter, when there approached, riding out of the shadows of the trees, several horsemen.

Instantly my horse gave a loud neigh of recognition, and I knew who it was that I had to meet.

One, two, three, and up to nine I counted the horsemen riding in single file toward me.

It was Wild Bill and his gallant comrades, my dashing, daring Pard of the Plains, who were before me, and they had headed me off, knowing my trail, to give me assurance that they would keep for me the pledge I had made.

It was a pleasant meeting, and, as Wild Bill had not told them the duty before them, I took from my pocket the letter from Belle Bradford and read it aloud.

Then I told them of my mission into the depths of the red-man's country, and that duty forced me to go, and that I relied upon them to save the maiden from the power of Kent Kennard, the alleged chief of the Red Owl Rangers of Kansas, than which no more desperate band of desperadoes existed on the border.

"Men, you know your duty now, and will you do it to the sacrifice of life?" said Wild Bill, sternly.

He was seated at the right of the line, and I was a few paces away, and glanced along the faces of the men as he asked the question.

Instantly, as if moved by one thought, their right hands went to their revolver-butts, the weapons were drawn out and held above their heads, and in a deep chorus, from every lip, came the words:

"To the death! we swear!"

I knew well the men that uttered the oath meant it in all that it might imply, and I felt that my being called away by duty was the means of raising up friends to Belle Bradford who could serve her far better than I.

With a warm grasp of the hand of each, I rode on my way alone, while Wild Bill led the Dead Shot Nine on the trail to Kansas to save a lovely girl from the power of a villain.

As I rode along I felt content, for I well knew that, had I the entire force of the border to pick from, I could not have found nine braver men, more reckless riders, dead shots, or big-hearted, brave fellows, than were those who were winding over the moonlit prairie in response to the appeal made to me by a young girl.

CHAPTER IV.

KIDNAPPING A LADY-LOVE.

ONE pleasant afternoon toward the hour of sunset, two persons were riding slowly over a Kansas prairie, evidently with the intention of resting their horses, which had been hard-driven the few miles passed.

Both were well mounted upon fiery mustangs, wiry in build, and displaying speed and bottom in their action.

One of the riders was a young girl of perhaps nineteen, dressed in a dark-gray riding-habit, which fitted her form to perfection.

She wore a soft sombrero encircled by a silver cord and with a black plume in it, pinned in its place by a pair of small gold cavalry sabers crossed.

Gauntlet gloves shielded her small, shapely hands, and under the right saddle-horn was a holster out of which protruded the silver-mounted butt of a revolver.

The face of the maiden was one to see and love, for it was exquisitely beautiful, her eyes being dark-blue, large, intensely expressive and shaded by the longest of lashes.

Her mouth was full-lipped, and frank and fearless, while her hair was of a reddish-golden hue, and so luxuriant that it could scarcely be confined about her haughtily-poised head.

Her form was the perfection of graceful symmetry, and she rode with the grace and abandon seen only in Southern women reared in the saddle.

Her companion was a lad of fourteen, with sun-browned, fearless face, a look of mischief in his dark eyes, and one who looked as though he might use well the rifle at his back, or revolver in his belt.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, moccasins, hunting-shirt of flannel, and wore a light-colored slouch hat with the tail of a wolf serving in the place of a plume, while he also rode with the ease of one perfectly at home in the saddle.

"We have made a long circuit, Brad, and it will be after nightfall before we reach the ranch; but if you are certain you saw the Red Owls in the timber I do not regret it, for I would not fall into their clutches for the world," said the maiden.

"Cousin Belle, I saw distinctly the Red Owls' masks worn by the Ranger band, and there were seven of them."

"You had stopped to tie up your hair, and I rode slowly on over the hill and saw them in the timber, though I do not think they saw me, and I at once rode back and told you, and it is best that we came round the way we did to avoid them," answered the boy.

"By all means, Brad, and it was lucky you discovered them; but do you believe that Kent Kennard belongs to that desperado band of Red Owl Rangers, Brad, as that scout I sent with a letter to Buffalo Bill said?"

"I don't know, cousin Belle; but I think that Captain Kennard is bad enough to belong to anything, and I'd rather kill him than see you marry him, as uncle says you must."

"Ah me, my brave little cousin, I fear that it must be, unless it can be proven that Kent Kennard is a Red Owl," sighed the maiden.

"But you believe Buffalo Bill will save you?"

"Yes, if he can; but the letter that Jack brought me last night said that duty called him away, yet he would send his Pard of the Plains to my aid, and to trust them as I would himself."

"Their plan will be to dog the steps of Kennard and get a clew to work on, and then capture him and his band, if he is indeed captain of the Red Owls."

"And they will come soon, cousin?"

"If they are not here in three days, Brad, I must marry Kent Kennard, for I see not how it can be prevented."

"Just tell him you will not."

"Oh, Brad, you do not understand all, for that man has it in his power to force me, through my love for others, into becoming his wife."

"And Captain Ralph Reynolds, cousin?"

"He cannot suffer more than I do, Brad; but it is not in his power to save me, for his duties keep him in Texas."

"Let me kill Kent Kennard, cousin Belle, for I am but a boy and they would not hang me," said the boy, earnestly.

"No! no! you must not talk so, Bradford Buckner, for do you think I would allow you to stain your young life with the blood of a human being?"

"No, I must rely upon Buffalo Bill, and if he fails me, then my lot in life will indeed be an unhappy one," and the tears came into the beautiful eyes, just as her horse gave a start and plunge ahead, as did also the animal ridden by the boy.

Glancing back, young Brad Buckner saw a horseman coming in a gallop behind them, and rapidly overtaking them.

"There comes the devil, coz," growled the boy.

"What do you mean, Brad?" cried Belle Bradford, reining in her horse.

"It's Kent Kennard!"

"Oh!" and the maiden's face grew pale, in spite of the rosy hue that exercise had flushed her with.

"Let us ride fast, coz."

"No, Bradford, for I dare not do so."

"I will go slow and let him come up," and in a few moments more a horseman rode alongside of the maiden, while he said pleasantly:

"Well, Miss Belle, I have had a long chase

after you, for I was in the timber with a few ranchero friends, when I saw you turn back."

"We thought you were Red Owls?" she said, coldly.

The horseman laughed, while the boy said:

"If you mean the Dead Man's Motte is where you were, those I saw there had the masks on of the Red Owls."

"That is your vivid imagination, Brad, my boy," was the laughing response of the man.

He was certainly an attractive-looking personage, dressed with a richness seemingly out of place on the border, for he wore a black velvet jacket, a snowy flannel shirt, the collar turned over a blue silk scarf, and his white corduroy pants were stuck in the tops of elegant cavalry boots.

He had gauntlet gloves upon his hands, a gray sombrero sat jauntily upon his head, and his spurs, weapons, saddle and bridle were of the richest manufacture and silver-mounted.

His face was a study for an artist, whether he desired a model for Sin, or one for Honor, for devilry and virtue were most strangely blended in his countenance.

His lips expressed daring to recklessness, vice and cunning, while his eyes were full of touching sadness in repose, and of burning defiance in excitement.

As a man about town, a soldier, a plainsman, he would attract attention ranging between admiration and fear.

"Do you ride our way, Captain Kennard?" asked Belle Bradford, coldly, as the man rode up to her side.

"Yes, for I was going to the ranch to see you," was the answer.

"I was in hopes I would escape any attention on your part, Captain Kennard, until the day appointed for—"

As she paused he added, with a smile:

"The sacrifice you would say; for it seems to almost break your heart to become my wife."

"I do not love you, sir."

"But I love you, Belle Bradford, and as I am aware that you are trying to escape me, I will not await the day appointed for our marriage, but will take you into my keeping now, so that there will be no getting out of it on your part."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Belle Bradford, quivering with anger and dread.

"Simply that you cannot escape if I hold you safe, and I shall keep you a prisoner up to the time you become my wife."

"After you are Mrs. Kennard you can return to your uncle's ranch and live, but not before, so you must come with me, and allow that boy to go home alone, and tell that you are in my care now."

"I'll kill you first, Kent Kennard," cried Brad Buckner, and the brave boy brought his revolver at a level and pulled the trigger.

But the cap snapped, and the man laughed, while he reached forward and grasped the rein of the maiden's bridle, at the same time remarking:

"Your weapons are not loaded, Brad, nor are yours, my fair Belle, for an ally of mine saw to that before you left the ranch, else that boy would have killed me."

"I will kill you yet, you wicked man," cried Brad, his eyes filling with tears.

"Silence, boy! and go your way back to the ranch, ere I hold you, too."

"Say to Major Buckner that I hold his niece my prisoner until our wedding-day, when she can return."

"Now be off, before I attempt to do you harm!"

And the eyes of Kent Kennard fairly blazed with anger.

"Go, Bradford, my dear little cousin, for you can do nothing to save me, and I must meet my fate."

"Go, and tell uncle Dick and mother all."

"Good-by."

And as the boy rode near she grasped his hand, and bending from her saddle, kissed him.

The boy could utter no word; his heart was full, his face writhing with suffering and anger, for he saw that his weapons had all been tampered with, so with a groan he wheeled his horse and dashed away like an arrow across the prairie, leaving Belle Bradford in the power of her kidnapper.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT.

STRAIGHT as the crow flies went Bradford Buckner, the frontier boy, to the ranch where he dwelt with his father, aunt and cousin, the latter now, to his deep sorrow, in the clutches of a man whom she hated, and whom all appeared to fear.

When he made his story known, of the kidnapping of his beautiful cousin, what could be done to save her?

His father, an old United States army officer, retired to a life on a Kansas ranch, had but a few cattle-men to aid him in the rescue of the maiden, even if he dared to make the attempt, which the boy believed doubtful, for, young as he was, he had seen and heard enough to know that Kent Kennard, through some means, held the winning hand at the Buckner Ranch.

There was some secret, what, little Brad did not know; but it was enough to make Captain Kennard the master, and his father, aunt and cousin the slaves of the holder of the secret.

"If father does not take cousin Belle away from that man, then I will do what I can to save her from him, if I have to go to Texas and tell her old rebel lover, Captain Reynolds of the Rangers, to come and help me," said Bradford Buckner, as he urged his mustang homeward at full speed.

Soon the sun went down, twilight came, and darkness would have followed, but for the moon rising into the clear skies and sending its golden light upon all.

Speeding along toward a group of dark shadows, with lights glimmering here and there, denoting a clump of timber and a ranch, the boy's eyes fell suddenly upon a horseman coming over the rise of prairie not far distant.

"Ho, lad! what's ther matter?" called out a familiar voice, just as the boy, knowing his weapons were useless, was about to dash away in flight, for Red Owls were filling his mind just then, and he expected to see one behind every bush.

"Oh, Jack! it is you?" and Brad dashed up to the horseman.

It was Jack Nelson, the bearer of the letter to me from Belle Bradford, and a man whose life from boyhood, almost, had been passed upon the prairies and in the Indian camps.

He was a perfect trailer, an experienced guide, understood red-skin nature, and bold as a lion, always ready to serve a friend or meet a foe.

"It's me, boy, and I seen yer coming like a skeert coyote afore sunset, for I was over yonder on ther timber hill; but what are up?"

"Jack, that villain, Kent Kennard, has got cousin Belle a prisoner."

"No!"

"Yes, we went out for a ride this afternoon, and on our way back to the ranch, I saw a number of horsemen in some timber, so we jodged back and made a circle of miles, as I distinctly saw red masks upon their faces."

"Red Owls, sart'in, boy."

"Yes, and I therefore wished to avoid them; but soon after Kent Kennard came galloping after us, and he told cousin Belle that he would take her away with him and make her his wife, as he had heard she meant to escape him."

"No! then he's got on to my going to Buffalo Bill?"

"I don't know; but I tried to shoot him, and my cap snapped."

"Durn ther cap!" growled Jack Nelson.

"He had some one at the ranch who had drawn the loads out of my weapons, and from cousin Belle's revolver too, Jack."

"The Satan! did he do that?"

"Yes, and so I came away to tell of her capture, for I could do nothing to save her."

"I only wish your pistol hed gone off, boy, and thar would hev been one man less on this prairie to-night."

"But let us see what is ter be did."

"Where are you going, Jack?"

"I had just concluded my leetle business settlements hereabout, and were going to the army to j'ine Buffalo Bill, as he hev engaged me now."

"Can't we do something to save cousin Belle from that wicked man, Jack?"

"I'll do what I kin, boy; but yer see one man and a leetle boy, plucky as a wildcat though you is, can't do nothin' ag'in' Captain Kennard."

"He is but one man."

"He's all of that, and a leetle more than most men, boy; but I feel sart'in he are cap'n o' ther Red Owls, and they is not ter be fooled with onless yer has ther grip on 'em."

"Now, as I said, I were startin' on ther trail fer Buffalo Bill's army camp, and I is free to believe that the pards he told me he were to send here to help the gal is on ther way, and I'll jist take a trail to meet 'em."

"And I can go with you, Jack?"

"No, leetle pard, for you must go to ther ranch and tell yer pa and auntie what hev become of your cousin, and I'll talk over the matter with Wild Bill."

"Wild Bill?"

"Yas, boy, for he are ther man thet Buffalo Bill have sent down here."

"He will save her if any one can."

"Right you are, leetle pard, Wild Bill are a man thet goes to ther end o' a trail ef he strikes it onc't, be it ever so long, and ever so red, and ef Kent Kennard hev harmed the lady, then he'll suffer fer it, or I is lyin'."

"Now, boy pard, go to ther ranch and rest easy, for I'll make it my biz to find Wild Bill and tell him jist what Kent Kennard hev done, and ef he are one o' ther Red Owl Rangers, I bets all ther pelts I hopes to git thet them prairie pards o' Buffalo Bill finds it out, and necks will be stretched."

"Well, Jack, I will go on to the ranch, and tell father and auntie that you are going to do all you can for cousin Belle."

"Good-by, Jack, and tell Wild Bill to look me up, if I can help him, for you know I am acquainted with the trails about here."

"I know it, boy, and you bet I'll tell him about you."

"Now I'll be off," and the two separated, the boy riding rapidly on toward the ranch in the distant timber, and Jack Nelson heading his horse northward and jogging along at an easy gait.

Suddenly he drew rein, for his practiced ear caught a sound upon the prairie.

"It's ther tramp o' hoofs, and iron-shod at that, so they hain't Injuns," he muttered.

"They has halted, too, and I guess it's because they heerd ther hoof-fall o' my horse."

"They hes sharp ears in thet party, and I wouldn't wonder ef it were Wild Bill and his pards."

"Leastways, I has ter be pertick'ler," and he listened attentively, while he gazed straight ahead of him, to catch sight of any object that might be upon the prairie.

In a little while he moved on again, and had gone but a short distance when very quickly he came to a halt, with the uncomplimentary remark:

"Well, I'll be traded off fer a fool afore I dies!"

What had brought him to a halt was at suddenly beholding a horse and rider rise out of the grass before him, where both had been lying prostrate.

Nor was this all, for upon either side others appeared, and, glancing hastily behind him, Jack Nelson discovered that he had calmly ridden into a trap.

"Well! I knows I hain't in danger, fer it are Wild Bill and his pards; but ef it wasn't, I'd have been in fer it sart'in, fer they seen me sooner as I seen them, and jist made ther alphabetical letter V of themselves, and I rid straight fer ther point same as ef I was a born green-horn o' ther city."

Having delivered this soliloquy, and seeing that the horsemen were closing in upon him, he continued:

"There is nine o' 'em, and I'll jist wait and let 'em corral me."

In a short while the nine men, who had stretched out V-shaped, closed in on the hunter, and as they drew near Jack called out:

"How is yer, pard Wild Bill, and is I ther game you is corralin'?"

"Jack Nelson, how are you, for I know your voice among a thousand."

"Why didn't you shout out who you were?" and Wild Bill rode up to the side of the hunter, who answered:

"I were just on ther hunt for yer, Wild Bill, and heerd yer hoof-falls; but it seems yer ears was better than mine, so you jist laid for me."

"We saw you before we heard you, Jack, so spread out for you to walk into the trap; but you know the boys I have with me, and we have come on a little business, which you are aware of."

"Any news?"

"Yas."

"Well, out with it."

"You is a leetle behind time, Wild Bill, fer ther leddy were tuk in some hours ago."

"Ah! captured?"

"Yas."

"By whom?"

"Ther King o' Satans, Kent Kennard."

"Did he force her to marry him?"

"Thet are further along, I guesses; but he did not wait until ther time were up."

"No, for according to the letter Buffalo Bill received, we had three days yet before the appointed time; but tell me, Jack, all that you know of this Kent Kennard?"

"Waal, Bill, he were a guerrilla in the Southern war, they says, and come here ter Kansas and went ter ranchin'."

"He were a lover of ther gal's, I has heern, long ago, but she wouldn't hev him, and so he's made life unpleasant fer her, and somehow her uncle seems ter favor his marryin' her."

"Now he are a howlin' terror, Bill, and don't you make no mistake that he hain't, fer he are grit clean through."

"He's got a good ranch, and plenty o' cattle; but they do say as how he is cap'n o' ther band o' outlaws known; hereabout, as the Red Owl Rangers, and ef he are, he should hang, for a more thievin' set o' devils never lived on ther perarer than is thet gang."

"They hes the'r secret camp in ther hills, and ther way they works is a caution, fer they drifts inter ther ranch country one by one, lays the'r traps ter rob, and then meetin' some night does ther job slick and gits away with ther plunder, while they allus leaves ther startin' o' a new graveyard abind them!"

"We have all heard of the Red Owls, Jack; but how many of them are there in the band?"

"Some says a dozen, others fifty, but I guesses you had better divide fifty by two, and you git near ther number."

"And we are nine."

"Yas, Wild Bill, but you is ther durnedest nine thet could be picked out fer a leetle scrimmage, and I wouldn't feel uneasy and lose my appetite about yer, ef I heerd as how yer hed tackled ther whole lay-out o' Red Owls."

"But yer knows all I kin tell yer now, 'ceptin' thet Cap'n Kennard's ranch lies jist ten mile

from here over on ther hill-slope o' ther river, and it are as strong as a young fort.

"Ther gal's home are fifteen mile to ther south from this p'int, and ther place whar Kent captered her is yonder, five mile as ther crow flies, whar thar is a timber mette known as ther Nine Trees."

"A good starting-point for our Nine, Jack; but I thank you, and if you see Buffalo Bill soon tell him you left us on the trail, and we'll go to the end of it."

"I'll bet yer does, Bill, for it's in yer and ther boys yer hes with yer."

"Luck, pards, and a good-night to ye," cried Jack Nelson, as he rode on his way, while the Dead Shot Nine dashed off over the moonlit prairie to strike the trail of Kent Kennard at the Nine Trees, that stood like a group of hunters at bay in the midst of the plains.

CHAPTER VI.

AN ACCUSATION DENIED.

THE Buckner Ranch was one of the pleasantest and most comfortable houses on the Kansas border.

It was delightfully located in some timberland upon the banks of a stream, and about it were a few sheltering hills, with the prairies stretching around in almost boundless expanse.

Major Buckner had been a brave Union soldier, and had settled, at the close of the war, in Kansas, on the very spot of wild lands where he had built and fortified a fort, to keep at bay the roving bands of Indians, and as a depôt of supplies.

The fort being deserted when the war ended, the major had turned it into his ranch, homesteading the lands thereabout, and thither had come his sister and her daughter, Belle Bradford, to make their home with him.

To the same region soon after had come to settle Kent Kennard, and it was very evident that Belle Bradford had been the star that had guided him to an abiding-place in the land of the setting sun.

That there was no love for Kent Kennard in the heart of the young maiden was evident, and yet there was a "skeleton in the closet" of the Buckner-Bradford household, which the young ranchero seemed to have the key to unlock, for he possessed a power over Major Buckner and Mrs. Bradford which seemed to hold them as in chains of iron, and thus did he force from them an unwilling consent that Belle should become his wife upon a given date.

In the sitting-room of the spacious cabin, known from its army associations as Headquarters Ranch, sat Major Richard Buckner and Mrs. Bradford, his sister.

The former was a man of fifty, with a military air and resolute face, full of kindness, while his sister resembled him closely, but wore a look of sorrow and anxiety commingled.

"Oh, if we could avert this sorrow from poor Belle, it would be happy, brother," said Mrs. Bradford, laying down her sewing and turning to the major, who moved uneasily, frowned and then said:

"Alas, Mary, I fear it cannot be done, for to anger Kennard is to precipitate sorrow and trouble upon us."

"He seems, withal, a pleasant fellow, yet he is not one I would select for Belle's husband, for he threatened at once, when I told him I did not wish her to marry, and I do not like a man who threatens."

"But the stories about his being a Red Owl I cannot believe, and he laughs at the accusation, and is sincere in his denials; but he loves Belle, he has money, and I hope will make her a good husband."

"God grant it; but how late she and Brad stay out to-night."

"The moon is up and they are enjoying their ride—there they come now," and the rattle of hoofs was heard without.

"That is but one horse, brother; oh! what if some harm has befallen my child!"

As the mother spoke the door opened and in strode the boy, Brad Buckner.

His face showed that something had happened, and in breathless suspense Major Buckner and Mrs. Bradford listened to the kidnapping of Belle, and what had followed.

"This is an outrage on the part of Kennard, and I will at once hasten over to his ranch and demand that he give up my niece," and Major Buckner's face flushed with anger.

In a few moments, accompanied by Brad, who insisted upon going, and two cowboys, he rode away from the ranch, and at a rapid gallop started for the home of Kent Kennard, distant some dozen miles.

A ride of an hour and a half brought them to the Kennard Ranch, and a servant, an old negress, told the major that:

"Massa Kent done gone 'way in de arternoon, and hain't comed back yit."

"Guess he'd gone to der willage," she added.

So to the village rode the major and his party.

Now this village was little more than a camp, for it was on the Colorado trail, and being the halting-place of westward and eastward bound trains, did quite a flourishing busi-

ness, while it was also patronized by the surrounding settlers and cattle-men.

A straggling street along the river-bank, several taverns, a score of saloons, a dozen stores, a hundred or two cabins, as many tents and shanties, one large building serving as courthouse, public hall and theater during the week and as a church on Sunday, made up the village of Prairie City.

It was a hard place, and its citizens were a hard crowd, lawless and desperate in the extreme, and given to gambling, horse-racing, target-shooting and drinking as the sports best suited to their tastes, while all points of dispute were settled by the revolver, rifle, or bowie-knife.

The principal inn in the place was also the fashionable saloon and gambling hall, and its rooms were almost constantly occupied by gentlemen who were suffering from wounds received in private and public encounters at the card-table or bar.

The tavern boasted of the name of the Overland Palace Hotel, and its title to palace lay in the one circumstance that it was the largest structure in the place.

A large hallway in which was the office, a dining-room on one side, a bar-room and gambling den on the other, a log kitchen in the rear, and above stairs the bedrooms, some sixty in number, constituted the "Overland Palace," and if any "guest" therein managed to sleep, amid the hubbub below stairs, he was either deaf as a post, prostrated by fatigue, or inured to such tumultuous scenes.

It was to the Overland Palace in Prairie City that Major Buckner wended his way, after leaving the ranch of Captain Kent Kennard, for he hoped to find him there, expecting that he had sought the place to force the timid little parson dwelling there into marrying him to Belle Bradford.

Making inquiry of the landlord—just such a personage as the Overland Palace needed for host, for he was a huge fellow, armed to the teeth, and capable of holding his own in a crowd—he learned that Captain Kennard was then playing cards in the saloon.

"How long has he been here, Sands?" he asked.

"All the afternoon, major, and playin' a winnin' hand too."

"Who is with him?"

"No one, as I knows about."

"Did he not bring a lady here?"

"No, major, he didn't."

Major Buckner looked troubled, but turned toward the gambling hall, after telling Bradford and the two cowboys to wait for him.

He was well known in that part of the country, and respected as a brave man, and a good one, so as he entered the room many spoke pleasantly to him.

It was a large room, and it was crowded with men, some playing cards at numerous little tables, and smoking pipes and drinking, others standing in groups looking on, and a large force ranged in front of a bar that was at one end of the saloon.

Certainly it was a strange gathering, for men were there as desperate as wolves at bay, and human life was strangely at a discount amid that wild, reckless crowd.

In one corner of the room a larger group than usual surrounded a table, and after a glance about him, Major Buckner walked over to this spot and was face to face with Kent Kennard, who sat playing cards for large stakes with three others, from whom he was winning with phenomenal good-luck.

"Kennard, when you play out your hand I wish to see you," said the major, quietly.

"Hallo, major, glad to see you."

"Will you take a hand in with us?" said Kent Kennard, in his free-and-easy way.

"No, sir, for I have more important business on hand than gambling, so I wish to see you at once."

Perhaps it was the major's manner that nettled Kennard, for his face flushed and he replied coldly:

"I am busy, sir, and will be as long as these gentlemen are willing to continue the game, so what business you have with me make it known here, for, Major Buckner, I have no secrets I wish to hide."

Major Buckner turned deathly pale, for he felt the allusion to hiding a secret was a hit at the "skeleton in his family closet," of which Kennard knew; but he kept down his anger, feeling that he was in the man's power, and said:

"Kennard, as you wish me to speak out, may I ask where my niece is?"

"Your niece?" and the gambler dropped his cards in surprise.

"Yes, you understand me?"

"Upon my word I do not."

"Did you not meet my niece upon the prairie this afternoon, near sunset, and—"

"No, sir, I did not see your niece this afternoon," was the prompt reply.

"Kent Kennard, I do not wish to throw the lie in your teeth, but I have proof that you did meet my niece, and more, that you kidnapped her."

A breathless silence was now upon all, for every eye was turned upon Major Buckner and Kent Kennard.

The former stood near the table, upright, white-faced and quivering with inward emotion, while the latter still kept his seat, one hand upon the table, the other below it, and a look of intense surprise was upon his strangely handsome face.

"Major Buckner, did I not believe you to have been the victim of some cruel hoax, I would slap your face, sir, for giving me the lie, when I tell you that I have not seen your niece to-day."

The major looked at the speaker an instant, as though he would read his inmost soul, and then he glanced at the faces about him and said, addressing a red-headed specimen of a prairie man:

"Brindle Ben, will you go out to the office and ask my little boy to come in here?"

"I'll do it, major," and amid a breathless silence he left the room, and a moment after returned, accompanied by Brad.

CHAPTER VII.

WILD BILL SCORES A POINT.

THE entrance of Brindle Ben, leading little Brad Buckner by the hand, created a sensation in the gambling saloon of the Overland Palace.

Bad as was Prairie City, no boy had ever before entered its gambling saloons, and, though Brad came there then as a witness, and not as a player, it did not allay the suppressed excitement.

There were not many children, in those days, upon that wild and lawless border, and the sight of the boy brought memories of a bygone surging into the heart of many a rude man who saw him.

Some of those memories were doubtless sad, for they recalled from a buried past the face of a loved child, and others maybe were bitter recollections of what might have been to many, had not their pathways led them adown the road to sin, instead of up the hillside to honor.

Here and there, as the fearless-faced boy moved forward, a tear arose into the eyes of stern-faced men, and one said audibly:

"God bless the handsome boy!"

He had doubtless thought his prayer aloud, for he dropped his head when his words brought the eyes of his companions upon him, though not one sneered at him for what had sprung involuntarily from his heart.

There was a face seen in the crowd, as he went along, that Brad recognized as having met before, and he nodded pleasantly as his eyes rested upon it.

Then he caught sight of his father, as the crowd opened for him, and beheld Kent Kennard facing him, still seated at the table, and with a reckless smile resting upon his lips.

"Here are ther leetle pard, major, an' he are a game one ter look at," said Brindle Ben, as he led the boy forward, adding:

"Yer kin hold onter my han', boy pard, fer I likes ther feel o' yourn, as it reminds me o' ther grip o' a leetle gal I used ter know afore licker got ther drop on me."

No one laughed at Brindle Ben for his words, for somehow the scene was an impressive one, and the boy's presence seemed to hold a check upon all.

"You wanted me, father?" said Brad, and his voice was heard by all in the hall.

"Yes, my son, for I have given Captain Kent Kennard the lie to his face, and it is upon your word that I have done so," calmly said the major.

"Well, father?" asked Brad, not exactly understanding the situation.

"Captain Kennard denies that he has seen your cousin Belle to-day."

"Then I, too, give him the lie!" came in the ringing voice of the boy, and his eyes flashed fire as he turned them upon Kent Kennard, while the room rung with the shout of applause and ringing of gloves at the defiant words of Brad Buckner.

But Kent Kennard did not move, nor his face change a muscle.

He showed no sign that he heard the applause, or that the boy had insulted him; but waiting until a dead silence came again, he said:

"Brad, why do you say that I have met your cousin to-day?"

"Because I tell the truth, you tell a lie."

"Be careful, boy, for I like not epithets cast in my face; but tell me when and where I saw her?"

"Upon the prairie, not far from the Nine Tree Motte, just at sunset, when you came up with cousin Belle and myself upon the prairie, and took her away from me!"

"Boy, you are mad, for I have not met you for days," and Kent Kennard's face certainly showed intense surprise.

"I say you have."

"And I say you are mistaken, for I will not give you the lie."

"You have mistaken some one else for me, and if Miss Belle has been captured, I will be the first to go on the trail of her captors, I assure you."

"Captain Kennard, you try to deceive my father, and these men, but you cannot fool me, for I leveled my revolver at you, the cap snapped, and you said that you had an ally at the ranch who had drawn the charges from the weapons of cousin Belle and myself."

"Do you deny that?"

"I do!"

"Do you deny that you told my cousin that you knew she was planning to escape from marrying you, and that you meant to hold her prisoner until she was your wife, after which she might return home, and you so bade me tell my father?"

"I do deny it," was the firm response.

"Oh, Kent Kennard! you would deny your mother and your God!" cried the boy, in a voice that was most impressive.

The accused half-sprung to his feet, his hand dropping upon his revolver, but a swaying movement of the crowd warned him that he was at bay against a crowd.

So he sunk back in his chair, and said in a voice that certainly seemed sincere:

"Major Buckner, you have brought your boy as proof that I kidnapped your niece, and you certainly have trained him well to carry out the accusation; but I deny it in toto, I deny all that he says, and the accusation against me is utterly false, as I too can prove."

"Where is your proof, sir?" sternly said the major, bewildered slightly by the seemingly honest manner of the accused.

"Father, he has no proof better than my eyes, and more, cousin Belle is certainly gone," indignantly said Brad.

"My proof, Major Buckner, I might insist, should be simply my word as a gentleman; but, as my accuser is your son, or boy, and you need more than my word offers, I will ask these gentlemen if I have not been gambling here since early in the afternoon, and certainly I cannot be in two places at the same time."

"That's what bothers me, for I think the boy means what he says, pard major; but then since two o'clock I have sat right here losin' money ter Cap'n Kent, and I knows he hain't been away, let alone ten miles off ter ther Nine Tree Timber," said one of the gamblers.

"Father, this is a game that Captain Kennard has arranged to play," urged Brad.

"No, my boy, the cap'n says truly, for he has been right here, as a dozen and more kin prove, so you was simply mistaken," remarked a storekeeper, who was engaged in the game of cards with Kennard.

"Mistaken in that man? Why, there's not another like him on the border," cried Brad.

"Still you are off the trail this time, my boy," said another.

"Can it be that you are mistaken, my son?"

"Father, did he not tell cousin Belle that he would keep her prisoner until he married her, and laugh at me when my cap snapped?"

"Did he not tell me to go to the ranch and let you know what he had done, and is there another man that I could mistake for Captain Kennard?"

"I know of no one," said the major, deeply puzzled.

"There hain't none, as you says, pard boy, like him, but I recalls now that ther cap'n hev been right here, and no mistake," put in Brindle Ben.

"I am not mistaken, for Kent Kennard stole my cousin from me this afternoon, for I know him well, his dress, his horse, his voice, and I tell you he is the man, for who else could have known about the intended marriage, and that cousin Belle was trying to escape from being his wife, for she hates him, and he knows it, and yet he would force her to marry him."

The dark face of Kent Kennard flushed at the words of the boy, alluding to the hatred of Belle Bradford for him; but he kept his temper and said calmly:

"Major Buckner, I am glad that you believe that your son is mistaken, after all the proof you have heard, for there are men here whom you cannot doubt, as they have nothing to gain, nothing to lose, by what they say."

"The boy is either mistaken, or he is playing a part to get me into trouble with the crowd, well knowing the excitable nature of a border gathering, and, but for proof of innocence, he would have succeeded."

"As it is, I do not believe that any one present believes his assertion now," and Kent Kennard glanced over the crowd of faces before him.

Not a man spoke, and silence reigned supreme.

"As for you, sir, I give you my sympathy in the loss of your niece, and, as she is pledged to be my wife, it shall be my duty to at once make search for her, and punish her abductor, at the same time showing young Brad here that he has falsely accused me."

"I have not! You are the guilty man, Kent Kennard!" rung out clear from the boy's lips.

"No, no, boy! you are wrong!" cried a number of voices, followed by:

"He hain't guilty this time, seetle pard!"

"He's been right here all ther arternoon!"

"Ther boy is off ther trail, sart'in!"

"It were some other feller got ther gal!"

"Either that, or the boy has been put up to accuse me and get me killed!" came in stern tones from Kent Kennard.

"Pard cap'n, I guesses you is right, for we all knows ther boy is wrong," cried one of the men who had been gambling with Kennard.

"I say the boy is right, and I am here to back up my words."

"That man is a villain!"

Like a bombshell the words of the speaker fell upon all, and as he strode to the side of the boy, a voice rung out clear and startling:

"Look out, pards! that man is Wild Bill, and he means business when he takes sides with ther boy!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THE name of Wild Bill was well known from Texas to Dakota, for he had won fame as a soldier, a scout, hunter, guide and Indian-fighter, while he had proven in many a personal encounter forced upon him that he was a man to be as dreaded as was death.

No one had seen him enter the Overland Palace gambling-saloon, so occupied were all in the scene between the boy, Brad Buckner, and the man, Kent Kennard.

He had glided into the room as silent as a specter, edged his way toward the center of excitement, and had spoken the words that so startled the crowd and caused a general swaying of those nearest to him, when one, who recognized the tall form and stern, daring face, called in a warning voice:

"Look out, pards! that man is Wild Bill!"

A cry of joy broke from the boy's lips, for he knew the secret of his cousin Belle, but he at once controlled all emotion, determined as he was that no one else, through him, should find out that friends were near to save the maiden from the fate that Kent Kennard had forced upon her.

"Wild Bill? And the ally of my son?" said Major Buckner, in a wondering way.

"Wild Bill! and he sides with that boy!" came in a hiss from Kent Kennard's lips.

And he dropped his hand upon his revolver.

But, quick as a flash, he was covered with Wild Bill's revolver, and he knew full well the deadly aim of the man he had to deal with, while stern came the words:

"Hold! hands off that toy, unless you wish to die, young man!"

Kent Kennard was no coward, nor was he a fool, and he accepted the situation and laid his hands before him upon the table, while he demanded in his cool way:

"Well, sir; why do you interfere here?"

"I dropped in, pard, overheard the boy's story, took the idea that you lied and he told the truth, so I sided with him and shall see him through; so open the ball if you don't like my chipping into your little game of devilry."

And Wild Bill's smile was a grim and dangerous one.

"I don't like your chipping in, and I will be willing to prove it when I am not held at a disadvantage, as I am now."

"Why, pard, I am a stranger here, looking for a place to hang my hat up for the night, and came in to enjoy a little game before saying my prayers and crawling into my little bed; but I won't see the boy harmed, I assure you."

"His father is here with him."

"That may be, and the old man's hair is gray, and you appear to have blinded him with your words; but the boy can see through you, and I side with him, and am ready to back him with gold, lead or steel."

"Do you play?"

There was something almost grand in the one man standing there, his back turned to the wall, his hands resting upon his revolvers, and his eyes flashing calm defiance over every face that met his own.

Had his name not been so well known, he would have at once been set upon by those hangers-on of the place, anxious to curry favor with the young ranchero, for whatever it might bring them.

But, as it was, not a man moved to force the fight, and Wild Bill held the winning hand by his very boldness.

"Who are you?" demanded Kent Kennard, in an insolent tone.

"Years ago I was christened J. B. Hikok, but on the border men call me Wild Bill. Perhaps you may have heard the name?"

There was no bravado in the words or tone; he simply answered the question he had been asked.

"Yes, I have heard of you as a desperado of the frontier," returned Kennard.

"Yes, those who do not know me call me so; but men call you Captain of the Red Owl Rangers—are you?"

"Curse you! you insult me because you have the power."

"I find you in the midst of your friends, while I do not behold one face friendly to me here."

"But come, let us not quarrel, but decide this matter regarding your kidnapping the young lady, as this boy says you have."

"Do you mean to force yourself in as judge on this case?"

"I do!—judge, jury, and executioner, too, if need be," was the reply, amid a silence that was deathlike.

Then, turning to the boy, he continued:

"Come, little pard, tell your story, just as it occurred."

Brad was with difficulty suppressing his delight, and in a few words told of his ride with his cousin, the discovery of the men in the Dead Man's Motte, with masked faces of Red Owls, and what followed after Kent Kennard had overtaken them.

There were those present who believed the boy, and yet there were those who had asserted that Kent Kennard had not been away from the Overland Palace all the afternoon.

"You say that this boy's story is false?"

And Wild Bill turned to Kent Kennard.

"I most emphatically do."

"Why should the boy lie?"

"It is a plot against me, because the girl does not wish to be my wife."

"Yet you would marry a woman who hates you?"

"With my actions you have nothing to do, Wild Bill."

"I assume the right, sir; but why, instead of a plot against you, is it not your plot to get the girl and prove by false witnesses that the boy has lied?"

"Do you accuse these gentlemen of speaking falsely?" asked Kent Kennard quickly, anxious to bring into the quarrel those who had asserted his innocence, that he might have a chance to escape from beneath the fiery eye of his accuser.

"I accuse no man; but I say that it is more likely you have paid men to swear in your favor, than that this boy should be in a plot against you."

"Pardon me, sir; but as you do not know some of us who assert Captain Kennard's innocence, let me assure you I am not one to be bribed, nor are others here."

"Frankly, I do not like Captain Kennard, nor do I trust him; but I know he has not been away from this saloon for the past ten hours, and the kidnapping, as I understand it, of Miss Bradford, was some four hours ago."

The speaker was a man whose face and manner carried truth with his words, for he was by no means a border ruffian, as Wild Bill saw at a glance.

Ever courteous, Wild Bill remarked in response:

"Your assertion, sir, carries weight with it, for I do not believe you to be a man to lie to save a rascal."

"I am an army officer, sir, spending a short time in town to nurse my brother, who is in the hotel suffering from a severe wound received some weeks since."

"I have seen this man, Kent Kennard, often, and I can assure you, bad as he may be, he is innocent of the charge made against him by this boy, for, deeply interested in the games played here, I have not been absent from the saloon more than ten minutes at a time all the afternoon."

"I am Captain Arthur Tayloe, sir, of the—th cavalry, now stationed at Fort Larned."

"I have heard of you, Captain Tayloe, and am glad to meet you, sir," said Wild Bill, turning toward the tall, fine-looking officer, who wore but a woolen hunting-shirt, corduroy pants and slouch hat in place of his uniform, and whom no one had suspected of being an army officer, though they had regarded him as no ordinary personage.

"And I am glad to meet you, Wild Bill, for I have often wished to do so; but I am particularly glad in this case, to keep down trouble where you are in the wrong, for you are certainly mistaken, my little man," and Captain Tayloe turned to Brad, who promptly answered:

"No, sir, I am not mistaken, for it was Kent Kennard, and no one else, that kidnapped my cousin Belle."

"Well, little pard, since we have the word of Captain Tayloe in favor of this man, there is a mystery connected with the whole affair, and I shall clear it up, I promise you."

"Your cousin has been captured, you say by this man, and yet positive proof is given to the contrary; but I have seen worse tangles unraveled, and it shall be done."

"Gentlemen, one and all, join me in a drink," and Wild Bill raised his hat to the crowd, while, turning to Kent Kennard, he added:

"Of course, sir, I include you also."

"On one condition, sir," said Kent Kennard, coldly.

"Well, sir?"

"That you pledge yourself to give me satisfaction for the insults you have heaped upon me at any time I may demand it."

"With pleasure, sir, and more: as you seem to be largely a winner to-night at cards, I will give you the opportunity to try your luck against mine, and it may foreshadow which will be the loser in the game of death that one day must be played between us," and Wild Bill spoke in the easiest manner possible.

"As you please, sir; the game of life and

death I have often played, and won," and a sinister, cruel smile swept over the face of the handsome ranchero, as he stepped up to the bar to take his drink.

In the confusion of the moment Major Buckner and Brad slipped out of the saloon, and mounting their horses rode rapidly away from Prairie City, accompanied by the two cowboys.

"Ah, Brad, my son, you have made a great mistake, and I only hope it will not cause Kent Kennard to harm us," said the major.

"I have made no mistake, father; and how can he harm us more than he has in running off with poor cousin Belle?"

"He has it in his power to do so, Brad; but more I cannot say, other than that you were mistaken in the man who kidnapped Belle."

"No, father, I am not mistaken; but it does seem strange that even that army officer, Captain Tayloe, would speak in favor of Kent Kennard."

"It is most mysterious, indeed, and I know not what to do."

"It is a mystery that will be solved, father, and soon, my word for it."

"But who will solve it, and who will save poor Belle, for wretched indeed must she be?"

"Wild Bill," was the low response of the boy, as the two rode on over the moonlit prairie, their horses headed for the scene of the capture of Belle Bradford.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERIOUS SENTINELS.

As the little party of four dropped the lights of Prairie City, over a roll in the prairie, they saw a horseman before them, who suddenly came into full relief against the burnished sky.

"Who is that?" whispered the major, unconsciously pointing at the lone rider, and evidently startled at the seeming apparition.

Horse and rider were as stationary as marble statues, and were directly on the trail.

The four riders had drawn rein, and silently surveyed the motionless horseman.

Was he one of the Red Owls? Was he a friend? Why was he there, in the night, and alone?

"There is only one, father," said the boy, noticing his father's excitement and the cowboys' evident trepidation.

"Yes, boy, only one; but it is strange. Why is he waiting there? Who is he? We must know. Be on your guard, boys. Now, forward!"

As they rode on again it was evident that the strange horseman noticed their approach.

Still he did not swerve from his position directly in their path, and remained like one who held no fear of the four advancing upon him.

"Be ready, boys, should he mean trouble," ordered the major, and on they rode, the strange horseman still as motionless as a statue.

Nearer and nearer they drew to him, until but a few paces divided them, and in the bright moonlight they saw him distinctly.

He sat his horse splendidly, wore a complete suit of buckskin, had a rifle slung at his back, and his hat shaded his face but little, revealing strongly-cut features, and his hair fell upon his broad shoulders.

Each hand rested upon a revolver, that was half-drawn from a holster on either side of the silver-studded horn of his Mexican saddle, and it was seen that he was ready for defense or attack, as might be necessary.

"Good-evening, gentlemen!" he said, in a pleasant voice, as the party drew rein to a halt.

"Good-evening, sir, to you, and let me add that you are a bold man to let four persons ride upon you as you did, for we might have been other than we are," answered the major.

A light laugh, which showed the white teeth of the stranger, broke from his lips at the reply, and he said:

"My dear sir, I seldom count odds in meeting men on the prairie."

"I was waiting here; you were coming on a trail that brought you near, so why should I give way until you forced me to do so, or I drove you off your path?"

"Who are you, for your face is strange in these parts?"

"Along the northern border I am called Texas Jack."

The major, the cowboys and Brad started at the name.

They knew it well, and that the owner had been noted for deeds of daring which seemed strangely like tales of fiction.

A short while before they had met a famous man of the border, and now here was one in their path known to be the friend of Wild Bill, and who, as Texas Jack, was almost equally dreaded by the outlaws of the frontier.

"I know you well by name, sir, and from all I have heard of you do not wonder that you held your ground against us," said the major.

"May I ask, sir, if you are from the town of Prairie City?"

"We left it a quarter of an hour ago."

"Did you meet one there, Wild Bill by name?"

"We did."

"Was he in danger?"

"Not in any danger, sir, that such a man cannot extricate himself from."

"I thank you, sir; good-night, gentlemen."

And Texas Jack bowed in a way that showed he wished to end the interview.

"Good-night, sir! My ranch lies yonder, ten miles away, and if you care to visit it, you will be welcome."

And Major Buckner rode on with his companions, leaving Texas Jack as before, horse and rider seeming like a statue.

"Well, Brad, what do you think of that?" asked the major.

"More mystery, father; but do not let us speak of seeing Texas Jack."

"Why not, my son?"

"I cannot tell you, sir; only it is best not to let it get about that he and Wild Bill are here on our prairies."

"My son, you have some motive for this, and you do not make me your confidant; but I hope all will come well in the end."

"Now let us go to Dead Man's Motte and see if there is any trace of the Red Owls having been there, as you said you saw them, for with this moonlight we can easily tell."

"Yes, sir; their trails will show in this light," replied Brad.

And the horses' heads were turned toward the timber, which Brad and his cousin had avoided that afternoon after the discovery that the Red Owls were there, apparently lying in ambush for the coming of some one.

The Dead Man's Timber bore its name from the fact that half a dozen men had been ambushed there, by foes, and shot down, their graves being dug under the two-score trees that formed the motte.

With the bright moonlight, the scattering trees did not form a very secure hiding-place for horsemen, and Major Buckner did not fear an ambush, as he knew, after nightfall, few people cared to go there, for the superstitious among the bordermen said that the place was haunted.

He was desirous of seeing if there were any fresh trails in the timber, to carry out the assertion of his son that there had been Red Owls in hiding there.

The behavior of the boy he could not solve, and he was desirous of seeing for himself just what basis there had been for Brad's saying that his cousin had been captured by Captain Kennard.

The two cowboys were not desirous of visiting Dead Man's Motte, and they kept their eyes well ahead, and when the timber was yet quite a distance off, they made a discovery.

This was of a horseman riding slowly before them toward the timber.

Quickening their pace, as soon as he saw the horsemen, Major Buckner saw that the stranger did likewise, holding just such a distance between them.

Urging their horses into a run, the animal ahead also began to go at the same pace, and coming down to a walk once more, the stranger did likewise, until within rifle-range of the timber, when he halted and faced about.

Major Buckner spoke sharply to the two cowboys, who urged that it was an apparition leading them on, and rode forward.

"Halt! Who are you, and what do you want?" came in a decisive voice.

"I am Major Buckner of Fort Ranch, and would know who you are?"

"Have you ever heard the name of Night Hawk George?" was the reply.

"Yes, often, as one of the best scouts on our frontier."

"I am Night Hawk George."

"The friend of Wild Bill?" called out Brad Buckner.

"Yes."

"We came here to see if there was a trail of horsemen leading away from the timber, and left as late as sunset this afternoon," the major explained.

"Yes, there is such a trail—fifteen hoof-marks all told, and they lead toward the northward, and the trail is not many hours old."

"I thank you, sir; good-night!" and Major Buckner turned away, Brad by his side, and the cowboys following.

"Now, Brad, we go to the place where you say Kennard overtook you and captured Belle; but is not the meeting of these sentries most mysterious?"

"It is, father, and they seem to be on the very trail that the Red Owls and Kennard followed."

"Yes, and how strange, my son, that such famous men as Wild Bill, Texas Jack and Night Hawk George should be here, for they are among the most famous scouts on the border," and puzzling his brain to solve that mystery, Major Buckner rode on until they came in sight of the scene where Brad had parted with his cousin and her captor, and the boy said in a whisper:

"There is another silent sentinel, father!"

"By Caesar's ghost, you are right, Brad."

"Is he near where you parted with Belle?"

"He seems to be on the very spot, sir; and see, he is coming toward us!"

"He is, indeed. Well, we have seen the pluckiest men this night I ever met before, for one against four does not seem in the least to disturb them."

"I shall hail him," and raising his voice, as the party halted, Major Buckner called out:

"Ho, friend! who are you?"

"My name is White Beaver, if that is what you would know. I am a scout, now on secret service."

"Who are you?"

The voice was strangely musical, and yet it had the ring of commanding courage in it.

"I have heard of an army scout known as White Beaver, Fancy Frank and Magic Medicine man. He is the white chief of the Winnebago Indians, and I would know if you are that man?"

"I am White Beaver, the Winnebago chief; who are you?" came the demand.

"Major Dick Buckner, ranchero, and living at Fort Ranch, whither I am now going, and will be glad of your company."

"Thank you, but I must remain here."

"Do you know one Wild Bill?"

"Yes, and left him an hour ago."

"Where?"

"In Prairie City."

"In no trouble, I hope?"

"None; but let me ask you if you have observed a trail where you are?"

"Yes, of two horses, a third joining them; then one leaving, and the other two branching off northeast."

"Father, what did I tell you?"

"Who was it, if not Kent Kennard?" asked Brad in a low, triumphant tone.

"God only knows; but I am bewildered, so let us go home, and to-morrow we will see what we can do for poor Belle," and they rode on, the solitary horseman still remaining where they had discovered him, and so staying as long as they could see him.

"Thank Heaven we are near home, for this night has been a bewildering one to me," and Major Buckner seemed a trifle unnerved and fairly started as one of the cowboys said:

"Yonder is another statue-like horseman, major!"

He pointed to a distant roll of the prairie, where, relieved against the moonlit sky, a horse and rider were distinctly visible.

"He is not in our trail, I am glad to see."

"Come, let us hasten home, for this night has been strangely full of mystery to me," and the party dashed on to soon disappear in the timber about the ranch.

But, glancing backward as they rode out of sight among the trees, they saw the silent horseman still remaining at his post, apparently on duty, yet what duty they could not know.

CHAPTER X.

A BARRIER ON THE TRAIL.

I WILL now return to Wild Bill, whom we left in the gambling saloon of the Overland Palace.

His coming there had been a great surprise to all, for his name was known along the length of the border, and each night around the campfires, and at the saloons, the deeds of Wild Bill and other scouts had been the theme of conversation.

Hardly any one there in the saloon had seen him before; but recognized by the one who had called his name, he was the cynosure of all eyes, and his very name held men in check who, with another, would have sought a difficulty.

Why had he come there?

Was he on official duty?

Did he know more of Kent Kennard than others knew of him, for his business seemed to be with him?

Such were the questions asked, and a feverish excitement pervaded all when the two men, Wild Bill and Kent Kennard, sat down to play a game of cards.

Every other game was forgotten, conversation ceased, men drank quietly, nodding a toast to each other as they stood at the bar, and all waited for the beginning of the end that must come between those two.

The absence of Major Buckner and his son had been soon noticed and commented upon; but Wild Bill said simply:

"Let them go, for there is no work for either to do here."

So the interest centered in the two men who remained to try their fortune at cards.

The table Wild Bill chose was against the wall and within a few feet of an open window.

He drew the table out a couple of feet, took a chair, and, placing it to suit himself, sat down with his back to the wall and the window close upon his left hand.

Then he coolly lighted a cigar and said in his quiet way:

"I am ready for the game, Pard Kennard. What shall it be, and for how much?"

"Name your limit," was the response.

"Well, we will begin low, so I put up one hundred on the game."

The cards were shuffled, the game was played, and Kent Kennard won.

Wild Bill's face showed no sign of disappointment, and a second game was played through with the same result.

"Make the dust three hundred this time," suggested Wild Bill, quietly.

"As you like," was the reply.

And again the ranchero won.

Without a change of expression Wild Bill said:

"Gentlemen, you may know my gambling pard here, but I don't, so you will excuse me if I say that I don't exactly understand his luck, though I'm studying it.

"I don't accuse you of cheating, Pard Kennard, but if I should suspect you, the moment I do, I'll shoot and ask no questions. Do you understand?"

"It is a game two can play at, Wild Bill," was the threatening return.

"Yes; it takes two to play a game, but only one can win, and you know my ideas about playing square, and I'm no blind man, so go ahead, and make five hundred the stakes this time."

Kent Kennard nodded, and with bated breath the crowd looked on.

From some reason Kent Kennard played more carefully than before, and it was noticed that Wild Bill played mechanically, for he never took his eyes off of the hands of his adversary.

When the last card was thrown down Wild Bill had won the game.

He smiled in a sardonic way, while Kent Kennard became very pale, though he showed no other sign of emotion.

"Shall I prescribe for you again?" sneered Wild Bill, and Kent Kennard nodded.

The same stake was named, the game was played through in the same way, Wild Bill sharply watching the hands of the ranchero, and the scout won.

"Pard, I have a little work to do, so you must excuse me now; but another time we may meet, and then I'll give you satisfaction at cards, as well as in any other way you wish.

"Gentlemen, again join me," and Wild Bill arose, bowed, pocketed his winnings, called to the barman to set up drinks, and paying for them, left the saloon.

There were those who wished to follow him, but there was that in the manner of the strange man that forbade it, and when soon after, Captain Tayloe, the army officer, went out, expecting to find him in the Overland Palace, he discovered that he had not been there, and searching among the other taverns, he could find no trace of him, or any one who had seen him out of the saloon.

Returning to the Overland, Captain Tayloe reached there just as he saw Kent Kennard mount his horse, held for him by one of his cowboys, who had evidently been waiting outside, and the two dashed rapidly away out of the town.

"That is not the trail to Kennard's ranch, and he is evidently following Wild Bill, the cowboy having posted him; but he had better let that man alone," thought Captain Tayloe, as he entered the hotel and sought his room.

In the mean time Wild Bill had mounted his horse, waiting under a shed near, and had hastily ridden off, as though anxious to avoid being seen.

He had taken the trail followed by Major Buckner and his party, and, reaching the open prairie, his practiced eye told him that others had traversed it since he had gone that way into the town.

Soon he came in sight of the statue-like horseman upon the trail. Then he raised his hands above his head. The other did likewise.

"Well, Jack, what news?" he called out as he drew near.

"I have had visitors, Bill," and Texas Jack told of the coming of the Buckner party.

"Well, call Broncho Billy and we will hunt a hiding-place, as soon as we have collected the other boys."

A shrill whistle from Texas Jack caused suddenly to rise, as from out the ground, a horse and rider, some half a hundred yards away, where they had been lying down in the long grass.

Approaching Wild Bill and Jack was a young man, with long hair that a woman might have been proud of, black as night, and a face almost feminine in its beauty, yet strongly stamped on every feature with manhood.

"Well, Broncho Billy, we will be off," announced Wild Bill, and then set off at a gallop over the plain.

Following the same trail that Major Buckner had, Night Hawk George and Dandy Dick—the latter having been in hiding near—were picked up at Dead Man's Motte, and the visit of the ranchero party was made known to Wild Bill.

Still pursuing the trail, they reached White Beaver seated silently upon his horse, on the spot where Belle Bradford had been kidnapped, and a whistle from him brought Dashing Dan and his horse up out of the prairie grass, where they had been in hiding.

"Now for Frank North and Bravo Buck," called out Wild Bill, and fifteen minutes after the other two, one standing sentinel on the prairie, the other lying down not far away, were come up with, and the party of nine were together again.

"Boys, we have not done a bad night's work, for we found the trails Jack Nelson told us of, discovered that horsemen had been in the vicinity of Dead Man's Motte, found out that the girl had been captured, by one who overtook her and the boy, and I met in the town Kent Kennard himself, the boy and his father, and there is a mystery that we have got to solve, for though Miss Bradford was taken, and, the youngster says by the ranchero, he proved an alibi that I could not go behind.

"We must seek a hiding-place from which to work, and in the morning take the trail of the girl and her captor and see where it will lead us.

"We'll halt a while over the rise yonder and see if we are followed."

The Dead Shot Nine then rode over the rise of prairie, their horses were staked out in the lower ground, and they threw themselves down upon the ridge to wait.

Half an hour thus passed, when Wild Bill said:

"Hark!"

All listened and heard the fall of hoofs, the sound growing louder and louder, which showed they were approaching.

"They are coming, and in some force," said White Beaver.

"We will be ready for them, pards, so form your line," was the quiet response of Wild Bill, who then took his position at the right end, and the others ranged alongside.

Kneeling on one knee, they unslung their rifles and brought them round, without an order, and in perfect silence.

Nearer and nearer came the horsemen, and they were now distinctly seen by the Nine, whose heads just peered over the hill-top.

"There are some twenty of them," said White Beaver.

"Yes, and they wear masks, as my glass distinctly reveals," assured Wild Bill.

Every man carried a glass, and it was raised to his eyes, a murmur of assent following, after which the rifles were grasped ready for work.

Nearer and nearer came the horsemen, and arriving within a few rods of the kneeling line, stern and startling rung out the command of Wild Bill:

"Halt! Hands up, all of you!"

CHAPTER XI.

SCATTERED TRAILS

WHEN Wild Bill gave the order to the coming horsemen, as they rode up over the brow of the prairie rise, he was prepared for a charge down upon his line.

They outnumbered him two to one, if not more, they appeared well-mounted, and their arms glistened in the moonlight.

They were not a body of cavalry, that was certain, and in the moonlight there was visible no white faces, only the same hue rested upon all, revealing the fact that they were either Indians, in the garb of pale-faces, or whites masked.

The latter was the idea the scouts took of it, and they were prepared therefore to meet face to face, as they believed, in a hand-to-hand struggle, the famous marauders of the prairie, known as the Red Owls.

It was therefore a matter of intense surprise to Wild Bill, as also his comrades, to see the horsemen wheel, as one man, without a word that was heard by them, and dust away like arrows from a bow.

A score in number, they took as many different trails across the prairie, urging their horses to full speed, and seemingly bent on the motto of:

"Every man for himself and Satan take the hindmost."

At this sudden and surprising act on the part of the horsemen, the scouts glanced at Wild Bill.

To have emptied nine saddles they knew it was in their power to do.

But no order came to fire, and the fingers touching the triggers did not move.

Thoroughly disciplined, the scouts acted without excitement, and hence no shot was fired, for Wild Bill gave no order so to do.

"Well, that beats all I ever saw; but let them go, for we will yet reach the ends of their trails, and I would not make a mistake and fire on a wrong party for a great deal," said Wild Bill.

"We might catch one of them," said Frank Powell, quietly.

"Do so then, White Beaver, but do not fire unless you have to.

"If any one can be caught you can do it with that horse of yours," and the words had hardly left the lips of Wild Bill when White Beaver had bounded toward his horse, thrown himself into the saddle, and then paused to pick out his man.

"We shall hunt a hiding-place over in the creek bottom, Beaver, so come there," called out Wild Bill, and with a wave of the hand White Beaver darted away, his superb black stallion, Mephisto, going like the very wind.

"Now, pards, it is best that we hunt cover, and the creek lies yonder, three miles away, and we must hunt it by different trails, so as to

throw any one off the scent that might be curious.

"There is a water wash near a large tree that rises high above the surrounding timber, and you can see it as you get near the creek, and there will be our rendezvous.

"Now, I go off this way, and we'll scatter the trails as did that band of horsemen, whoever they are," and Wild Bill mounted and rode off, the others following his example, and each one verging away from each other as far as possible, and yet have the same objective point in view.

In the mean time White Beaver had disappeared from sight over the rolling prairie, and he was riding hot on the heels of a flying horseman.

He was gaining rapidly also, his black stallion prancing forward at a speed that was wonderful, and yet not urged by spur or voice.

The intelligent animal seemed to fully understand just what was expected of him, and he meant to do it.

So lightly did he run, that his hoof-falls were drowned by the thud of the horse ridden by the fugitive, and after having gone a mile the horseman drew up and glanced about him.

His comrades had scattered so far that he could not see them, and he sat for a moment pondering, as it were, upon just what course to pursue.

White Beaver's quick eye had detected the halt, and quick as a flash he drew rein, sprung to the ground, and said:

"Down, sir!"

Into the grass dropped the horse like dead, and his master lay beside him, so that when the fugitive glanced behind him he saw no pursuer.

Having decided upon his course he turned off to the left and rode on at a slow lope.

Then White Beaver arose from the grass, his horse sprung up, and mounting, he started off at a course almost parallel with the fugitive, and yet circling a little from him and out of sight.

After going at a rapid run for a mile or more, he drew rein to the left, ascended a prairie rise, and glanced over the level plain.

There, as he had expected to find, was the fugitive, not two hundred yards away.

He was coming on at a canter, directly for the spot where Frank Powell awaited him, and he did not see the scout until within long pistol range of him.

Quickly he drew rein, and after a moment's inspection, called out:

"Is that you, Frank?"

"It is, pard," called back White Beaver most truthfully, his name being Frank Powell.

At this the fugitive rode on once more at a canter, directly for the scout, who moved toward him.

"Coyotes of Kansas! but what a surprise we had, Black Frank."

"Who were they?" called out the pursued, as he drew near.

"The Dead Shot Nine, pard," was the quick response of White Beaver, as he cast his lariat over the head of the man's horse, and at the same time leveled his repeating rifle full at the breast of the rider.

The startled horse bounded away, but was brought up sharp by the lariat, and the surprised and alarmed rider, caught wholly at a disadvantage, obeyed with alacrity the stern command:

"Hands up, or die!"

Leaving his horse still at a stand, holding the animal of his foe, White Beaver sprung to the ground and rapidly approached his captive, still covering him with his rifle.

"Well, sir, you are my game, and I'll trouble you for your toys," and White Beaver hastily disarmed the man, after which he took the lariat from about the neck of his horse, and threw the noose about the body of the rider, binding his arms to his side.

Mounting then, he started across the prairie, his captive riding in silence by his side.

Not a word was spoken by one or the other, on the ride to the rendezvous, and just as he reached the timber on the creek banks, Texas Jack called out:

"Ho, Frank, I was waiting for you, for the boys are all at the retreat, and a nice one it is too," and he joined White Beaver and his prisoner, adding:

"You got your man, I see?"

"Oh, yes, Jack, and nobody hurt; but this is a snug place for a retreat, is it not?" and he glanced at the ravine, heavily fringed with thickets, into which they rode.

Up the water-wash, or ravine, the scouts were visible, cooking breakfast, for dawn was just beginning to pale the moonlight, and their horses were staked out near enjoying a feast of rich grass.

All glanced up as the two scouts rode up with the prisoner, and Wild Bill called out:

"Bravo, White Beaver! you got your bird, and, as I live, it's a Red Owl!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE RED OWL.

THE man who was brought into the camp by White Beaver was an odd-looking being, at a cursory glance.

He was well-mounted, upon a jet-black horse, equipped with a Mexican saddle and bridle, and he was dressed in buckskin, even to moccasins.

At the back of his saddle he carried a roll of necessary baggage, a couple of serapes, an oil-skin blanket, leggings, and a rain-cap, or helmet of the same material.

A pair of boots and a slouch hat, with a haversack of provisions, hung at one side of the saddle, and a lariat, pistol-holster, and a small hatchet were upon the other, showing that the individual was well fixed for camping, fighting or disguising himself.

He was a large man, broad-shouldered, and carried a knife and revolvers in his belt.

But strangest of all was that his head and face were wholly concealed from view, and by a most unique covering, or mask.

It was a helmet-shaped covering, of red feathers, while the face resembled that of an owl, the beak and eyes being perfect, and so fitted that the wearer could both see distinctly and breathe without difficulty.

This odd head-dress fell to the shoulders, and gave to the man a most startling and odd appearance, and which had called forth the remark of Wild Bill to White Beaver, that he had caught a bird, and that it was a red owl.

"Now, sir, you can dismount," said White Beaver, as he halted with his prisoner, and Dashing Dan led their horses away, the Red Owl having quietly obeyed.

"Who are you, pard?" asked Wild Bill, as he led the man to the camp-fire.

But the prisoner made no reply.

"Are you deaf, pard?" asked Wild Bill.

Still no reply.

"Are you dumb also?"

Yet no response.

"He can talk, and he is not deaf," said White Beaver.

"What did you find out from him?" asked Wild Bill.

"I asked him no questions, but simply brought him in," was the reply.

"I have heard it said, Frank, you were womanly in your nature, and you are the gentlest man I ever saw; but you are not womanly in your curiosity," said Texas Jack.

"No, not to ride to camp with his prisoner and ask him no questions," remarked Frank North.

"I did not care to, so brought him to camp for you to question, Bill."

"How did you capture him?"

"Very simply; I rode after him until I saw him halt, and then Mephisto and I lay down, saw what course he was taking, headed him off and waited."

"He mistook me for one of his pards, who, I now recall, all rode black horses, or dark ones, for he called out:

"Is that you, Frank?"

"Of course it was, and I answered in the affirmative, rode nearer, and he obeyed my order to hands up, so I know he is neither deaf or dumb."

"Well, a bird that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing, so just take off his head-gear, Dandy Dick."

The scout stepped forward, carefully raised the feather mask, or helmet, and the face that was revealed was certainly as disagreeable as one as had been the owl's.

Red-headed, the hair cut short, with a cropped sandy beard, bloated face, and small evil gray eyes, he looked like one who would be guilty of any crime, and possessed no conscience to reproach him for it.

"The owl's face was the handsomer of the two," said Texas Jack, with a light laugh.

But the man made no reply, only stared at his captors in a dogged kind of way.

"Now, my man, you must answer the questions I put to you," said Wild Bill.

"In the first place," he continued, "are you not one of the band known as the Red Owls?"

The man appeared not to have heard the question.

"You refuse to answer, do you?"

Silence alone gave assent.

"Now, pard, you have been taken with your colors on, and therefore we know you to be one of the Owls; but, as you are our first capture, and we wish to make a quick ending of our work in this part of the country, I am willing to make terms with you."

Still the silence and the dogged stare.

"Now, if I offer you your life will you answer my questions truthfully?"

No response.

"You seem determined not to reply, and you may fear that we will not put you to death; but let me tell you that you are mistaken, for I bear an official order from the general commanding this district, to put all of the Red Owl band to death, as I may capture them, for you have all been guilty of the basest crimes, and not one of you is there but deserves hanging."

"But I make an exception of you, to save time, and accomplish my ends, and offer you your life and your pardon, if you will tell me what I would know and aid us to capture your evil comrades."

"Now, what do you say?"

The man appeared like one who did not think

he was the one addressed, and no response came from his sternly-set thick lips.

"Don't think that you have fallen into the hands of missionaries, who will try to redeem you from your wicked ways, for you have not, as you may know when I tell you that we have all been heard from on the border, and we have seen blood flow, and are not afraid of death."

"That gentleman, who so cleverly took you in, is Doctor Frank Powell, the White Beaver Chief of the Winnebagoes, while this pleasant-faced youth is Texas Jack, and that tall man you may recall when I tell you his name is Major Frank North, or Fighting Frank, also a white chief of Indians, the Pawnees."

"Then we have Night Hawk George, Broncho Billy, Dashing Dan, Dandy Dick, Bravo Buck, and last, I am known as Wild Bill."

"Now that you know us you may perhaps be pleased to respond by introducing yourself."

The man's face had twitched nervously at the mention of the names; but he still preserved that stolid silence.

"You refuse to accept my offer, and talk?"

No reply.

"White Beaver!"

"Well, Bill?"

"You captured this man, so what shall we do with him?"

"He is in your hands, Wild Bill."

"You are sure he can talk?"

"Yes, for he hailed me."

"Then I will lose no time with him, as he is so stubborn, but carry out the general's orders."

"Buck!"

"Yes, Bill."

"Take Dandy Dick and Dashing Dan to aid you, place this fellow fifteen paces in your front, fire at the word and kill him."

"What say you, pards, to the sentence?" and Wild Bill glanced over the faces of his comrades.

"It is just, for the Red Owls deserve no mercy," responded Frank North, and the others nodded their approval.

"Once more, my man, will you accept your life on the terms offered?"

The captive did not show a sign that he heard the question, and Wild Bill said impatiently:

"Bravo Buck, you have your orders, so carry them out!"

Bravo Buck stepped forward and led the captive away a few paces, placed him in position, took his stand in front of him, with Dandy Dick and Dashing Dan, and Wild Bill called out:

"Speak quick, Red Owl, for we are in deadly earnest!"

Not a word came in response, and then followed the command:

"Fire!"

The three revolvers flashed together, and the man's lips were forever stilled by instant death.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN BORROWED PLUMAGE.

HAVING been so constantly on the go, of late, both men and horses needed a rest, and Wild Bill determined to remain in camp until late in the afternoon, when they could go to the spot where Belle Bradford had been captured and take up the trail there and see where it led.

With such a clear night of moonlight as the one just over, and it promised to be, he did not have any fear of not being able to follow the trail, once they had struck it, and he knew that all needed rest.

The dead outlaw had been buried, breakfast had been cooked, and was partaken of with a relish, and Texas Jack and Broncho Billy agreed to stay on the watch while the others slept, and both took up their positions at a point of observation that commanded the approach to the camp, and from such a distance that they felt, sleeping as they did lightly as a watch-dog, they too could rest.

White Beaver, however, seemed to feel not the slightest fatigue, and calling to Wild Bill, he said:

"I think I shall turn Red Owl for awhile, Bill."

"How do you mean, Beaver?"

"Well, there is that fellow's suit, rig-out and horse, and I might as well start out to see what I can discover in it."

"You know best, Beaver, and it's not a bad idea," responded Wild Bill, adding:

"But go slow, pard."

"I will; now how do I look?" and White Beaver drew on the owl's head mask.

"The Owls would never know you as a strange bird, Beaver," laughed Wild Bill, as he threw himself down to rest upon his blanket.

Putting on the buckskin suit of the dead outlaw, and mounting his horse as well, White Beaver rode out of the camp.

Leaving the timber of the creek, which here made a bend almost in the opposite direction, White Beaver struck out over the prairie, following his own trail of the night before.

Straight to the spot where he had been come upon the night before by Major Buckner and his party he went, and there discerned the trails that met, and the one that branched off toward the westward in the direction which Wild Bill had told him lay the ranch of Kent Kennard.

"I'll see just where this trail goes," said White Beaver, and he cast his eyes about him, when he discerned a horseman coming slowly over the prairie, his head bent down, as though he was following a trail.

To dismount and lead his horse away to a water-wash, some hundred yards away, was the work of a few moments.

But the gully was not deep enough to hide the horse and scout, and the persuasions of the latter were not sufficient to force the former to lie down.

"Down you must go, horse," said White Beaver, and quickly he threw the lariat about the animal's legs, and threw him flat on his side.

Then he lay down upon him, and was just hidden from the view of any one riding near.

"It struck me that I caught a glimpse of some one in the rear of the first horseman; but I had not time to take a second look, so must go slow, as Wild Bill says," he muttered.

Arranging some grass, which he cut off with his bowie-knife, in front of him, so as to hide his head, he peered through it out upon the spot where had occurred the mysterious capture of Belle Bradford by one who had proven himself to be miles away at the time.

Soon the rider's head came in sight, and he halted upon the scene of the kidnapping.

"It is that boy I saw last night, and whom Wild Bill says so pluckily accused the ranchero of being the captor of his cousin."

"Well, he's a plucky one, and he seems to be alone and trying to follow the trail himself; but I shall wait and see."

So saying, White Beaver waited for awhile, and then said:

"There he goes! off on the trail of the maiden and her capturer, whoever he was."

"I will follow him as soon as I am sure that he is not followed by some one else, for I cannot get it out of my head that I caught sight of some one else."

So he waited patiently for quite awhile, and was about to get up from his hiding-place, thinking that what he had seen must have been a buffalo, when suddenly a horseman rode into view.

He was dressed in buckskin, wore a slouch hat, rode a black horse, and was well armed, while his face was by no means a prepossessing one.

"That fellow is trailing the boy, certain, so I'll call a halt on him," and White Beaver stepped up from his hiding-place, his revolver ready in hand and advanced rapidly toward the stranger.

He was not seen until within good range, as the man was attentively regarding the numerous trails that branched off from that point.

His horse starting suddenly revealed the scout, and the man drew his revolver quickly, unheeding the ringing command:

"Hands up, pard!"

But he now saw that the one advancing upon him wore the Red Owl mask, and he lowered his weapon and called out:

"Who are you, pard, that you don't know your Red Owl comrade Brandy Ben?"

"Ho, Ben, is that you? Why didn't you speak sooner, for the sun in my eyes blinded me," and White Beaver walked straight up to the horseman, apparently trying to uncock his revolver, as an excuse for keeping it in hand.

"Wal, I don't git onter who yer is, pard, though yer colors is all right."

"Who is yer?" and the horseman looked suspiciously at the scout as he rapidly approached.

"Black Frank," answered White Beaver, remembering the name the Red Owl had called out the night before.

The result was unexpected to White Beaver, for the man dropped his hand like lightning on his revolver, while he called out:

"Black Frank hain't got white hands!"

With his words he fired, and the bullet struck the scout's pistol, knocking it out of his hand before he could fire, while the shock caused his arm to fall by his side, temporarily benumbed.

But instantly his left hand fell upon the revolver upon his left hip, and yet before he could use it his adversary fired a second time, the bullet this time cutting the feathers from the owl's head.

Ere he could fire again White Beaver drew trigger, and the man fell forward on the horn of his saddle, while his horse started to run.

But, quick as a flash the scout seized the bridle-rein and the rider dropped to the ground, a bullet in the center of his forehead.

"That was a close call for me," coolly said White Beaver, throwing off the owl-mask, and bending over the slain man.

"Ah! here is a badge of service in the Owl band."

And he drew out of a saddle-pouch an owl's head-dress like the one he had worn.

"This is number two of the Owl Rangers."

"Let me see. I cannot play Black Frank from what he said with white hands, so I will have to blacken them, or play Brandy Ben, the spirited name this gentleman hailed under."

"Let me see! I will bury him yonder in the water-wash and then hasten on after the boy."

"I am sorry I had to kill him, for he might

not have withstood the temptation offered his comrade, and kept silent."

So saying, White Beaver carried the body to the gully, released the bound horse and soon had him buried with the aid of the hatchet which he, too, carried at his saddle-horn, as the other outlaw had done.

Resuming his mask, he then mounted one horse, and leading the other rode at a gallop after the boy, who was now evidently a long distance ahead of him.

"Well, if we go on at this rate, the Red Owls, preferring death to talking, and having to kill others to keep from being killed and thus losing the chance of a dying confession through wounding them, we are in a fair way to wipe out the band and yet not find the girl if she is really their captive, as Wild Bill says he is convinced she is, her energetic lover, he thinks, being a member, if not leader of the outlaws."

Thus thinking half aloud, White Beaver rode on at a lope, the led horse following readily, until suddenly and seemingly from out of the earth came the startling words:

"Hands up! or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YOUNG TRAILER.

WHEN young Brad Buckner returned home, with his father, their story was told to Mrs. Bradford, who was in deep distress at the loss of her daughter.

"It is some trick of that vile man, Richard, for he alone is guilty," she said to her brother, after the major had told her how Kent Kennard had proven an *alibi*.

"But that army officer's word could not be doubted, sister."

"I would doubt every one but Brad."

"He was with Belle, and he well knew Kent Kennard, and he is not mistaken, let that man prove as he will that he was not there."

"I know him but too well, and that he swore that Belle should never marry any one but him."

"During the war he was nothing more than a guerrilla, serving on both sides, as it pleased him, and there is nothing that he will not do, and I believe that he has intercepted the letters from Captain Ralph Reynolds, who you know in his last, brought by that army courier, said he had written often, and had received no reply."

"He said he had told Belle he would appear suddenly, and make her his wife, as it was hard for him to get away."

"Now I am convinced that Kent Kennard got these letters, in some way, and so determined to kidnap Belle, fearing she would in the end not marry him."

"But the power he holds in his secret over us, sister, should have convinced him that Belle dared not do otherwise," urged the major.

"But he is aware that Belle does not know this secret, and might disregard its value."

"That might be."

"I tell you, Richard, Kent Kennard has captured Belle, and no one else, and she is now hidden at his ranch, or somewhere else, and I think you should take your cowboys and go there and demand that he give her up."

"And have him make known the secret, sister?" said the major, in a low tone.

"Alas! I forget his power over us."

"No, we must wait and suffer."

This much did Brad Buckner hear, as he lay in his little room near where the major and Mrs. Bradford were talking, and he made up his mind that he would go the next day to the ranch of Kent Kennard and demand that he give up his dearly-loved cousin.

"He won't dare kill me, a boy, and yet I can kill him," was the thought in his mind as he dropped off to sleep, leaving his father and aunt still talking together in the sitting-room.

After breakfast the next morning he looked to his weapons most carefully, mounted his best mustang, and saying that he was going off on a hunt, rode away from the ranch, leaving his father and aunt still asleep, for they had not retired until dawn.

Straight to the spot where the kidnapping had occurred he rode, and after examining well the different trails, decided upon which was the one he wished to follow.

"That track is made by Rocket's hoof, I know, and nobody can fool me on that," he muttered, referring to the horse ridden by his cousin.

He little dreamed that the eyes of White Beaver were then upon him, or that his trail had been crossed some distance back and followed by the man calling himself Brandy Ben.

"Come, Fire-cracker, we must be in a hurry, for we are on Rocket's trail, and I think we can follow it to the end," he said, addressing his spirited little mustang, that started off at a swinging walk, seemingly following the trail of his equine comrade by instinct.

The boy had gone but half a mile when he heard the crack of a revolver, followed by a second and third report in quick succession.

The prairie was very undulating where he was, and he could not see very far around him, but his eyes fell upon a buffalo wallow not far away, and toward this he rode, the trail going close to the side of it.

Arriving there, he beheld the horns of a buffalo, and around it the grass had grown to a considerable height, so that the boy saw a safe hiding-place, or at least a place of defense should he be pursued by an enemy.

To ride into the wallow and make the pony lie down was but short work, and then he went on foot to the highest rise near him and looked around the prairie.

No one was in sight, and no more pistol-shots had he heard.

He knew that Indians or Red Owls were likely to be about, and he was aware that his life was in danger; but he was a fearless young fellow, and nerved himself to meet the worst.

After waiting a considerable time he concluded to go back to his pony and resume his trailing when, boylike, he leaped up into the air to get a better look before going.

As he did so his eyes fell upon the head and shoulders of a horseman coming over the prairie.

Again he sprang several feet into the air, and distinctly saw the coming horseman.

"He's following my trail, too," he said, as he ran back to the buffalo wallow.

Fire-cracker had gone to sleep, but awoke at approach of his young master and seemed anxious to be moving; but Brad soothed him, and lying flat down upon the prairie, gazed through the tall grass on the edge of the buffalo wallow at the point where he expected the horseman to appear.

He had not very long to wait ere the rider came in sight.

"It is a Red Owl!" cried Brad, as he saw the red feathers and owl's head.

"And he is leading a horse," he added, as he got his rifle ready to fire.

Nearer and nearer came the horseman, and then he came to a halt, closely examining the trail he was following.

Nearer and nearer, until suddenly from out the buffalo wallow, shrill and clear, came the words that end the foregoing chapter.

In an instant White Beaver recognized the boyish voice, and he threw his hands above his head, while he said, in his pleasant way:

"My hands are up, my boy; but I'm not a Red Owl, as you suppose, only masquerading as one."

"Come out and let us get better acquainted, for you caught me fairly off my guard."

"Who are you?" cautiously asked the boy, still keeping his position, and his rifle at a level.

"I am one whom you met on the prairie last night, when with your father, and am the friend of Wild Bill."

Brad was cautious, and extremely so for a boy.

He did not wish to be entrapped, or to fall into the hands of the Red Owls.

Here was a man before him, who certainly wore the mask of a Red Owl Ranger.

So he determined to "go slow," and said:

"What was that firing back on the prairie awhile ago?"

"I shot a Red Owl, who would not surrender, and this is his horse."

"Let me see your face, please!" and the request was more of a demand, for Brad still kept his rifle leveled.

"Certainly, my boy," and White Beaver took off the red head of the owl, and glanced at the youngster with a smile.

"I know you now, for my father and I spoke of your handsome face, and of your soft-toned voice after we left you," and White Beaver smiled at the innocent compliment of the boy, while he said:

"Well, my boy, I am glad to have met you, and I must tell you I was on your trail, for you passed near me an hour ago, and I would have hailed you then, only I had caught sight of the Red Owl on your track, and wished to ambush him."

"Now, let us have a talk together, and you must tell me all you know about this capturing of your cousin, and then I may take you into confidence, and together we must save the young lady and hang her kidnapper."

"Oh, sir, if you only would."

"What, hang the kidnapper?"

"Yes, sir, and save cousin Belle, too, for I know she is so wretched, and I don't wonder, for she has such a splendid sweetheart in Texas, who is captain of the Rangers there, and it will break his heart if she is forced to marry that rascal Kent Kennard."

"Well, she shall not, if the Dead Shot Nine can help it."

"Who are the Dead Shot Nine, sir?"

"You shall soon know; but you must keep the secret."

"Now to follow the trail left by your cousin and her captor, whoever he may be," and in a few moments more the two set off on the trail across the prairie left by the horses of Belle Bradford and the man who held her captive.

CHAPTER XV.

WHERE THE TRAILS ENDED.

WHEN White Beaver and the boy started upon the trail of Belle Bradford, the scout was anxious to discover if the tracks led them to the home of Kent Kennard.

He knew that the boy was well acquainted with the ranch of the daring lover of his cousin, and could give him much information that would be valuable to the party in carrying out their plans.

The Dead Shot Nine had arrived upon the scene of action, to find the maiden gone, and it was their intention to find her and punish her abductors.

There was a great deal of mystery connected with the affair, but this must all be cleared up.

The terrible band of Red Owls had been met face to face, and most ignominiously they had fled without firing a shot, though doubling the scouts in number.

What it meant the Surgeon Scout could not understand; but he felt that before Wild Bill gave up the trail he would solve all mystery and punish the guilty.

As he rode along with Brad Buckner, he gleaned from the talkative boy all the information he could regarding the country, the settlers, the town of Prairie City, and about Kent Kennard.

Brad told all he knew, so that White Beaver was pretty well posted when they came in sight of a distant ranch.

"That is the home of Kent Kennard, sir," said Brad.

"Yes, and the trails seem to lead just there."

"Yes, sir, for Kent Kennard, and no one else, kidnapped my cousin Belle," firmly responded the boy.

White Beaver gazed with some interest upon the ranch they were approaching.

It was located upon the banks of a stream, lightly fringed with timber, and upon a rise that approached almost the prominence of a hill.

It ended in an abrupt bank, some thirty feet high, on the stream, and sloped off gradually toward the prairie.

There were hundreds of cattle seen about on the prairie, with a cowboy here and there watching them, and a broad trail led to the stream, where there was a watering-place and ford.

About the ranch buildings there was a stockade wall some eight feet in height, with but one gateway, and inclosing a space of ten acres, one end of which was used as stock-pens, where cattle could be driven in case of danger, and the other for the cabins and outhouses, which were surrounded by well-kept vegetable gardens.

There was one large cabin, with six rooms, facing the stream, and it was strongly built and comfortable.

Then there were smaller cabins further away, for the men, a smokehouse, storehouse and a large stable for horses constantly in use.

"He has a snug home there, and as strong as a fort," said White Beaver, who was watching the place, as he approached it, through his field-glass.

He had taken off his owl's mask, and resumed his slouch hat, so that he had the appearance of a plainsman.

"Will you go on to the ranch, sir?" asked Brad.

"Yes, near enough to see if this trail goes directly to the gate, for I know the track now of the horse ridden by your cousin, and can tell it anywhere."

"Suppose Kent Kennard is there, sir?"

"Well, I will simply tell him I am following Miss Bradford's trail, to his house, and ask if she is there."

"He will say no."

"Then it will remain to see if he can prove it, for I shall return to camp and make my discovery known."

Brad seemed pleased, for there was something about this pleasant-spoken, handsome man that gave him confidence.

So on to the ranch they went, passing near two cowboys who eyed them significantly, but said nothing.

The trail led straight to the gate and then disappeared, and Brad said exultingly.

"I told you so, sir!"

"Yes, this looks bad."

"Hello, within there!" called out White Beaver.

"What's wanted?" said a gruff voice from the other side of the stockade, and his voice came through a small hole in the wood, from which he had evidently seen the approach of the scout and the boy.

"Is Captain Kennard in?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"In Prairie City."

"Has he any visitors at the ranch?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sart'in."

"Is there not a lady here?"

"No."

"A lady was out riding last night, got lost, and the trail of her horse leads here."

"She hain't here."

"Have you seen a lady come here?"

"No."

"Will you let us come in and await the return of your master?"

"I hain't got no master."

"Well, of Kent Kennard?"

"Nobody's allowed in when he's away."

"That's strange border hospitality."
 "It's safest."
 "Well, we will have to call again."
 "I don't care."
 "When do you expect him home?"
 "Don't know."
 "Come, Brad," and White Beaver turned away from the gate, the boy by his side. Riding up to the two cowboys, who were smoking their pipes under a tree, White Beaver said:
 "Good-morning, gentlemen."
 They nodded without reply.
 "Can you tell me when Captain Kennard will be at home?"
 "No."
 "The gateman says he is away."
 No reply.
 "Have you seen a lady on horseback crossing the prairie since yesterday?"
 "No."
 "Have you seen any Red Owls about here?"
 "No."
 "Do you know Wild Bill?"
 They started, and eyed the scout slowly, while one said cautiously:
 "We has heard o' him."
 "He has not been seen about here to-day?"
 "No."
 "Gentlemen, I bid you good-day," and White Beaver bowed with mock politeness.
 "Who is you?" called out one of the cowboys.
 "Have you ever heard of White Beaver, the Surgeon Scout?"
 "We has, and he's a dandy to kill."
 "I am he," and White Beaver rode on, while one of the cowboys gave a long whistle of surprise.
 "Well, Brad, we found out where the trail led, and the manner in which Kent Kennard's men treat us convinces me that there is something wrong in his ranch.
 "Now come with me to my camp; but you will have to keep the secret."
 "I will, sir," said Brad, delighted at feeling himself growing into such importance as to have a secret with, and be the companion of, noted scouts of the plains.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHASING AN APPARITION.

It was late in the afternoon when White Beaver rode into the creek timber, where the Dead Shots were encamped, Brad accompanying him, and the outlaw's horse following behind.

Wild Bill had allowed all to have an easy, restful day of it, for he had much confidence that White Beaver would bring back good news, so that even the sentinels had taken a good sleep.

The result was that all felt refreshed, and had just gotten off their blankets when White Beaver was reported coming across the prairie, and not alone.

Some of the men began to get a dinner and supper combined, others led the horses to water, and Wild Bill, Night Hawk and Frank North awaited the coming of White Beaver.

"By Jove, but the boy is with him that I met last night, and he's clean grit tooth and nail," said Wild Bill, recognizing little Brad, as they drew nearer.

"It is strange that he should bring the boy to camp," remarked Frank North.

"Oh, he's got good reasons for it, you may be sure; but he has a led horse, too."

"That's so," put in Night Hawk George, and the interest in the coming of the Surgeon Scout increased, until, by the time he rode into camp, all the men were there to receive him.

"Well, Beaver, we are glad to see you," called out Wild Bill.

"Thank you, Bill, and I have brought a friend whom you'll remember, Mr. Brad Buckner, gentlemen, the pluckiest boy of his inches on the plains," and at the introduction Brad doffed his slouched hat politely and sprang to the ground, while the Dead Shots, not to be outdone in politeness, returned the courtesy.

"Bill, I have not had a useless ride of it, I assure you, since I left camp this morning, as you will see when I have told you my story."

"No, Beaver, it isn't your style to make useless trips, and I'll wager we will know just what to do now."

"Thank you; but you shall hear all that I have to say, and then decide."

"I struck for the spot where Miss Bradford was captured, and following her trail, took cover when I saw some one coming."

"At the same glance I thought I saw a second horseman, and so concluded to go slow."

"This young man passed my hiding-place, and I saw that he was following his cousin's trail; but I let him pass on, and waited."

"I had begun to think what I had seen following him was a stray buffalo, when into view came a horseman."

"He looked like a scout, but I determined to try him on, so advanced from my hiding-place, and he called out not to shoot, for he was my pard Brandy Ben."

"Then he asked who I was, and upon my re-

plying Black Frank, he said my hands were white, so I could not be the man I claimed, and he opened fire.

"He meant well, for his bullet shattered my revolver and numbed my hand for a few minutes, and by the time I got my left on my other pistol his second shot cut off some feathers on my owl's head."

"Then his target practice ceased," significantly said Frank North.

"Yes, for I shot him, and I saw that he was also a Red Owl."

"I buried him decently, and borrowing his horse, weapons and head-dress, set out on the trail of Brad, here, and he was laying for me, caught me napping, and made me hands up quick."

"I convinced him that I was not an Owl, and we went together on the trail of Miss Bradford, tracking it directly to the gate in the stockade surrounding the ranch of Kent Kennard."

"Then you were right, my boy, and I wish I had pushed matters against that man last night; but his testimony seemed so complete, as to his having been in the Overland Palace saloon all the afternoon and evening, that I had to give him the benefit of a doubt."

"Yes, sir; it did seem as though I was mistaken; but I know Kent Kennard well, and he and no one else took my cousin away," remarked Brad.

"Well, we will get at the truth of it all, my boy, and if he is guilty, woe be unto him."

Then turning to White Beaver Wild Bill continued:

"We must look to our laurels, Beaver, or you'll get away with the whole nest of Owls before we have a chance at them."

"Accident has helped me, Bill; but I learned much from my young friend here, and, as I feel sure he can keep a secret, I asked him to come by camp with me, that you might make what inquiries of him you wished and then have him return home and leave all in our hands."

"I would like to go with you, sir," said Brad.

"No, my son, you cannot do that; but we give you our word to find your cousin, be she dead or alive, and more, to punish those who carried her off."

"Now have some dinner with us, and after a rest start home, for it will be night ere you get there."

"I don't mind that, sir, for I know the prairies well."

"Had some of us not better go with him, Captain Bill?" asked Night Hawk.

"Oh, no, sir; please don't do that, or you'll make me believe you think I am afraid," urged Brad, in terror at such a thought crossing the minds of his scout comrades.

All laughed at his earnestness and then sat down to dinner, which was heartily enjoyed, after which Brad bade the Dead Shots good-by and rode away on the trail to his home, while White Beaver sought a few hours' sleep that he felt he needed, leaving his companions to clean up their weapons, rub down their horses and get ready for the night's work, for Wild Bill had said:

"Pards, we will take the trail to-night to Kent Kennard's ranch."

Upon leaving the camp of the scouts Brad Buckner felt years older than he had in the morning.

There were men among the Nine Dead Shots who had been his ideal heroes since he could first read of their exploits, and he not only had seen them, but eaten in their camp, and his advice had been asked regarding many questions, for they had soon seen that he knew the country remarkably well and was far beyond his years in information and pluck.

Leaving the recovery of his cousin in such hands, he felt content, and rode on his way with every hope that he would see her before long, safe and well.

He had pushed Fire-cracker pretty well during the day, and so let him go at a slow pace homeward, for he was not anxious to arrive early, as he did not expect his father and aunt would be alarmed about him.

The sun set while he was yet miles away, and as he drew near the spot where his cousin had been taken from him, and which he had to pass on his way to the ranch, the moon appeared above the prairie horizon.

The sky was as clear as crystal, the stars shining with radiant luster, no mist was in the air, and all about him was visible with remarkable distinctness.

Suddenly he halted, and an exclamation escaped his lips.

He was on a rise of the prairie, and straight before him, just soaring above the horizon, the moon looked like a huge ball of fire.

But that was not what surprised him, for he had watched its coming up and enjoyed it.

That which brought him to a sudden halt, and forced from his lips a cry, was at seeing, photographed, as it were, upon the moon's face, a horse and rider.

A moment he glanced at it, and then a glad cry came from his lips, and Fire-cracker bounded forward as he felt the spurs suddenly driven into his flanks, and which caused him to start with anger.

No, there could be no mistake, for that horse he well knew.

It was Rocket.

And more, the rider he knew still better.

It was Belle Bradford.

Like the very wind he sent Fire-cracker flying over the prairie, directly toward the rising moon.

The horse and rider could not be very far away, and they had seemed motionless.

The moon had risen up from the prairie horizon, but there, in the ray of light, still remained Belle Bradford, seated upon Rocket.

The maiden seemed to be awaiting his approach, though without the moon for a background he could not tell.

Nearer and nearer he drew, now dashing down a slope, and then ascending the rise upon which she stood.

Fire-cracker stumbled, and it took the gaze of the boy momentarily off of the maiden.

When he had gathered up his reins and again looked, she had disappeared.

"Oh! she thinks I am some enemy and has run," cried the boy, and again did his mustang feel the digging spurs.

Up to the summit of the rise he went, and then he glanced over the prairie.

Where she had been was the spot where she had been captured.

Now she had gone, but some distance away was the horse and rider at a standstill.

"Cousin Belle! cousin Belle!" he cried in a voice that rung over the prairie.

Back to his ears came mocking laughter that fairly startled the brave boy.

"Cousin Belle! cousin Belle! don't run from me, for I am Brad."

"Please wait for me!" and he shrieked the words almost, as with another mocking laugh that grated harshly upon his ears, the horse wheeled and dashed swiftly away across the prairie.

Amazed and frightened Brad pursued, cruelly using his spurs; but he saw that Rocket gained rapidly, heard the mocking laughter, and beheld a white handkerchief in the moonlight, waving to him a farewell.

"Oh, Lordy! cousin Belle is dead, and that must be her ghost," groaned the poor boy, and that moment Fire-cracker went down heavily, pinning his young rider beneath him.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE PURSUIT.

REFRESHED by several hours' sleep, and a hearty meal, the Surgeon Scout was as ready for the saddle as were his comrades; in fact his iron frame was capable of undergoing more fatigue than is generally allowed to the lot of man.

It was just twilight when the Dead Shots moved out of the ravine.

It having fallen to the lot of Dashing Dan to serve as "stock-tender" and "train-master," he led the two horses which White Beaver had captured from the outlaws, and which the scouts were glad to have along.

He was also to hold the horses of the others, if they found it necessary to make a move on foot.

They had not gone very far before the moon rose over the prairie, and Wild Bill remarked:

"I think I should prefer darkness to-night rather than moonlight."

"It would be better for approaching the ranch," returned White Beaver, who rode by his side.

"We've got to take things as they come; blow hot, or blow cold, daylight or darkness, it's all the same to me," remarked Texas Jack, in his light-hearted way.

"We go straight to the spot where the girl was captured, and then follow the trail, which you know, Beaver," Wild Bill said, as they held on in that direction.

"Yes, for that trail leads us to the gate of the ranch, which we wish to go to first," responded the Surgeon Scout, and the party rode on in silence, two by two, Dashing Dan bringing up the rear with the led horses, which seemed to have been well trained to follow.

Arriving near the spot, as if one man held the rein of every horse, the nine men halted.

There, full in the moonlight, was a horse and rider, upon the trail, where Brad had said that Kent Kennard had captured his cousin Belle.

"It is the girl, by all that's holy!" cried Wild Bill, in suppressed tones.

"Yes, it is the girl, and she seems to be watching us, as though not knowing whether to run or not," answered White Beaver.

"Suppose you hail her, Bill, as it might frighten her to ride toward her," suggested Night Hawk George.

"You are right, George, I will," answered Wild Bill, and raising his voice, he called out:

"Ho, lady, we are your friends, not foes!"

No response came, though the horse seemed to move uneasily.

"Call again, Bill!" said Frank North.

"Miss Bradford! we are your friends!" repeated Bill.

Still no response.

"Say, Broncho Billy, you are a lady-killer, so suppose you ride forward alone and see if

you can get her to talk to you," said Wild Bill.

"Yes; if she'll wait for any one, she will for Billy Blue Eyes," Bravo Buck remarked.

"He's afther bein' sich a delutherin' cuss among the leddies," Texas Jack said with a rich Irish brogue.

And the scouts laughed, while Broncho Billy, who was also known as Blue-Eyed Billy, returned:

"I'll try her, but odds on it that she runs away."

And he rode slowly forward.

The maiden had her eye upon him as he approached; that seemed evident.

But she did not move, and seemed to be urging her horse to remain quiet.

"Blue Eyes is charming her," whispered Dandy Dick.

"He's the boy to do it," responded Bravo Buck.

"Begorra, no! he's skeert her entoirly," cried Texas Jack, as the maiden was seen to suddenly wheel her horse, and, with a ringing laugh, dart away.

Broncho Billy halted and looked back to Wild Bill for orders.

Instantly the scouts spurred forward, and coming up with Broncho Billy, Wild Bill said:

"She has gone, pard."

"Like a flash; but I got near enough to see that it was the girl the boy described as his cousin."

"I never doubted that; for who else could it be?"

"That's so; but she's halted."

It was true; the maiden had come to a halt after riding a short distance.

"Try her again, Will," said White Beaver.

"Yes, go alone, for she certainly will run if we all move toward her."

So Broncho Billy moved off once more and directly toward the maiden, who had again halted on a rise of the prairie and stood facing them.

"What a wild laugh she gave," said Night Hawk George.

"I noticed it," responded his brother, White Beaver.

"There was nothing for her to laugh at," Frank North rejoined.

"Boys, I don't half like this; but see! Billy is very near her once more."

And Wild Bill leveled his field-glass.

"Hark! he is speaking to her," cried Beaver, and all heard Broncho Billy's voice.

But again came the mocking laughter, and once more the maiden bounded away.

The horse of Broncho Billy sprung forward a few lengths, as though his rider were urged to follow her, but then he was checked, and stood awaiting the coming of the scouts.

As they reached Broncho Billy the maiden was seen to again draw rein and face them.

"Well, Billy, she won't be charmed?" said Wild Bill.

"No, and I tried my most dulcet tones upon her, telling her I was the friend of the fatherless, and no enemy, or words to that effect, and she gave that laugh, which I don't like, and went off like mad."

"Wonder if the girl hasn't been killed, and that isn't her ghost?" said Dashing Dan from the rear.

"Nonsense, Dan, you've been superstitious ever since you attended that Irish soldier's wake, when he was drunk and not dead, and got up and run the gang out of the camp," Texas Jack replied.

"I'll admit he scared me, and that girl does, too, with her strange conduct," rejoined Dashing Dan.

"Bill."

"Well, Beaver?"

"I do not half like that girl's laugh, for to my ears, as a physician, it has a mad ring."

"Yes, Beaver."

"Let me go forward alone, Wild Bill, and see if I can get near her; but if not, and she runs again, I will pursue and come up with her, for Mephisto certainly can catch her."

"Do you think it right, Beaver?"

"Well, I look at it in this way."

"The girl may have had enough trouble since her capture to turn her mind, and having escaped, as she seems to have done, she does not know the way home."

"Now, it will not do for her to run about these prairies, and in a short chase I think I can overtake her, and then, if she is brain ill, I can help her."

"You are right, Beaver."

"And another thing is strange to me."

"Well?"

"Do you not observe that she is following her own trail?"

"You are right; she is going along the trail her captor carried her, and toward his ranch."

"She is, indeed, and if she does she will be again taken, so I will try and capture her."

"Do so, Beaver," said Wild Bill, and the Surgeon Scout settled himself well in his saddle for a run if necessary, and rode on ahead of his comrades, going at a slow trot directly toward the horsewoman, who calmly awaited his coming, as she had with Broncho Billy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HOT CHASE.

UNTIL the Surgeon Scout had approached, even nearer to her than she had allowed his brother, Broncho Billy to come, the maiden remained.

So sure were the band of scouts that White Beaver would be allowed to go up to her, that Texas Jack said pleasantly:

"Broncho, the Doctor has cut you out this time."

Having gotten quite close to her, White Beaver drew rein, for he did not wish to startle her, and he said in his pleasant voice:

"Good-evening, Miss Bradford."

"I hope you are convinced now that we are your friends?"

A wild, mocking laugh that grated most harshly on the ears of all who heard it, was the only response, and away bounded the horse, bearing his rider swiftly onward.

But at once White Beaver started in chase, saying in a low tone to his horse:

"Come, Mephisto, yonder animal is akin to the wind in speed, but you must run alongside of him."

"Come, old fellow, come! for he is dropping you."

At seeing White Beaver dart away in pursuit of the maiden, Wild Bill called out:

"Now, boys, we must keep as close as possible, for that is a fast horse the girl rides."

Away they went at a sweeping gallop, Dashing Dan keeping well up with the led horses.

"She is gaining on the Doc," cried Texas Jack.

"She is for a fact," Frank North added.

"You are right, pards; the girl is leaving him," Wild Bill said, somewhat anxious.

"What is the matter with Mephisto?" Night Hawk George asked, as he well knew what his brother's black could do.

"Nothing is the matter with Mephisto, George; it's with the other horse, and he's out-footing Frank's pride," observed Broncho Billy.

"We are riding very fast, pards, as you see, and White Beaver is dropping us rapidly; but I don't wish to push our horses too hard unless there is need of it; but you see that girl is mounted on an animal that is faster than any we have, as is seen when she drops the Doctor as she does."

"How's your horses, Broncho?" asked Frank North.

"Fast, but Mephisto leads any in the pack; but Frank is holding his own now."

"Shoot out on Lightheels, Broncho, and see if you can come up with them," said Wild Bill, and Broncho Billy's horse darted away like an arrow, as though understanding the order of the scouts' captain.

Rapidly he gained for a while, and then, as though observing that a second horseman had left the band of scouts, the maiden again urged her horse to greater speed, and once more began to gain, while Broncho Billy soon saw that Mephisto was also leaving Lightheels, who was doing his best.

"That girl is splendidly mounted; but then she's light weight."

"Still, if her horse can stand that pace far he is a marvel, and I'll pay high for him," muttered Broncho Billy.

In the mean time it had been a very great surprise to White Beaver, when he called upon Mephisto to do his best, to see that Rocket—for he knew the name, from Brad Buckner, of Miss Bradford's horse—was leaving him.

"He cannot drive far at that gait," he said, and so he did not urge Mephisto hard, believing that the maiden would soon break her horse down.

But as he saw that Rocket still held his speed, and ran as though not in the least distressed, he began to change his opinion of his lacking bottom, and so urged Mephisto the harder.

Thus some distance was gone over, the maiden holding steadily to the trail which led to the ranch of Kent Kennard.

On like the wind flew the two horses, and glancing back over the moonlit prairie, White Beaver beheld Broncho Billy coming a few hundred feet behind him, though he did not recognize who he was, and behind him the other seven scouts riding in a group and on a run.

"Some one is trying to help me, thinking Mephisto is failing from some reason; but they do not know the horse he is chasing."

"Now come, old fellow, and catch that fleet-footed fellow ahead," and the splendid horse increased his pace.

But the girl did the same, and thus she kept him at the same distance, though both were running away from Broncho Billy.

"On, Mephisto, or that mad girl will reach the ranch before you catch her."

"On, sir!" and White Beaver spoke sternly.

The obedient horse did still better, but Rocket held him where he was as soon as his rider saw that her pursuer was slightly closing the gap.

"Here, Mephisto, this won't do, and I must try the spur," and for the first time in his life the splendid beast felt the spurs pierce his flank.

A snort of rage and pain followed, and the animal fairly bounded high in air, at the same time increasing his speed at a great rate.

A startled cry came from the girl at this, and then was heard the swish of the keen lash falling upon her horse, and he too snorted with fright and anger, and ran the more speedily, again holding the scout where he was.

Angry at the speed developed by the maiden's horse, White Beaver now bent to the work of overtaking him, and he spurred Mephisto hard, and the animal seemed to slowly gain.

But so slowly was it that it was hardly perceptible.

Then, too, came the sound of the whip falling on the other animal, and he once more gained slightly.

"This won't do," hissed White Beaver through his shut teeth, and he began to throw off his fatigue coat.

Into this he wrapped his bat and rifle, and rolling them up in his serape taken from behind his saddle, he dropped them gently on the prairie, leaning far down to do so.

"There go a dozen pounds," he muttered.

Next followed his holster revolvers, belt of arms, haversack, surgical case and roll of clothing, with his oil-skins and blankets.

"There go twenty-five pounds more."

"Now, Mephisto, you have thirty-seven pounds less weight, so catch that horse!" and the Surgeon Scout let the animal feel the full force of the spurs.

Maddened and frightened, for his master had never before so used him, the noble steed fairly flew over the prairie, and the lighter weight began to tell, for the scout saw that he was gaining, and well.

The maiden realized it, too, and fast and furious rained her whip upon the back of her horse, and he, too, once more began to gain, and the speed of both was terrific.

But this mad pace could not last very much longer White Beaver soon saw, and as he glanced ahead, he said, grimly:

"Nor will it have to, for yonder is the Kennard ranch."

The scouts were not visible now behind him, and the maiden was still half a hundred yards ahead, while the ranch was but the sixteenth of a mile.

There were no cattle grazing on the prairie now, no cowboys were visible, and at the ranch no light shone.

Seeing it, the maiden broke forth in another burst of wild laughter and soon after dashed up to the stockade gate.

Hoping to capture her before she could enter, White Beaver was boldly following, when suddenly the gates swung open, and in through them she rode, they closing quickly behind her.

Expecting a shot, the scout wheeled quickly about and rode back to meet his companions, his horse panting under the long, hard run.

Getting out of range, he halted, and began to caress the noble animal, while he rubbed his spurred flanks with bunches of grass.

Soon up came Broncho Billy, and he called out:

"You didn't catch her, Frank?"

"No, though I threw off all the weight I could."

"I picked up your rifle and things, and felt sure you would catch her when I saw how much in earnest you were."

"Here they are, and yonder come the boys."

The scouts soon came up, and Wild Bill said:

"Well, Beaver, she outfooted you?"

"Yes, and has gone into the stockade gate, which was opened for her."

"Then into the stockade we must go."

"I have a plan to get in by strategy, Bill."

"All right, for it would be rough work to storm the place, so out with it, Beaver, and we'll back you," said Wild Bill, with the air of one who was aroused to do any act of daring to recapture the maiden from Kent Kennard.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHITE BEAVER'S STRATEGY.

FOR a moment after Wild Bill spoke, White Beaver stood in deep thought.

Then he said:

"Mephisto has had a hard run, so I'll leave him with you, Dashing Dan, and mount one of the Red Owl horses, while I will also rig myself out as one of the band and ride up to the gate."

"With the moon where it is, my face can be seen and recognized by whoever is at the gate, so I'll get there."

"But to make it more sure, I'll ride back on the prairie, approach the ranch from over yonder, and when you see me get a trifle past you, start as though in chase of me."

"I'll run at full speed for the stockade, and the man there will recognize me as a Red Owl being pursued and let me in, and I'll soon see that the gate is open for you."

"Yes, Beaver; but you take big chances."

"Not with the disguise."

"But you assume that Kennard's ranch is really the haunt of the Red Owls?"

"Certainly; for he would not dare have kidnapped that girl unless he had the outlaw band to protect him."

"We know that they are somewhere on the prairie and that they have a haunt near, and this must be the place, for toward the stockade,

He was well-mounted, upon a jet-black horse, equipped with a Mexican saddle and bridle, and he was dressed in buckskin, even to moccasins.

At the back of his saddle he carried a roll of necessary baggage, a couple of serapes, an oil-skin blanket, leggings, and a rain-cap, or helmet of the same material.

A pair of boots and a slouch hat, with a haversack of provisions, hung at one side of the saddle, and a lariat, pistol-holster, and a small hatchet were upon the other, showing that the individual was well fixed for camping, fighting or disguising himself.

He was a large man, broad-shouldered, and carried a knife and revolvers in his belt.

But strangest of all was that his head and face were wholly concealed from view, and by a most unique covering, or mask.

It was a helmet-shaped covering, of red feathers, while the face resembled that of an owl, the beak and eyes being perfect, and so fitted that the wearer could both see distinctly and breathe without difficulty.

This odd head-dress fell to the shoulders, and gave to the man a most startling and odd appearance, and which had called forth the remark of Wild Bill to White Beaver, that he had caught a bird, and that it was a red owl.

"Now, sir, you can dismount," said White Beaver, as he halted with his prisoner, and Dashing Dan led their horses away, the Red Owl having quietly obeyed.

"Who are you, pard?" asked Wild Bill, as he led the man to the camp-fire.

But the prisoner made no reply.

"Are you deaf, pard?" asked Wild Bill.

Still no reply.

"Are you dumb also?"

Yet no response.

"He can talk, and he is not deaf," said White Beaver.

"What did you find out from him?" asked Wild Bill.

"I asked him no questions, but simply brought him in," was the reply.

"I have heard it said, Frank, you were womanly in your nature, and you are the gentlest man I ever saw; but you are not womanly in your curiosity," said Texas Jack.

"No, not to ride to camp with his prisoner and ask him no questions," remarked Frank North.

"I did not care to, so brought him to camp for you to question, Bill."

"How did you capture him?"

"Very simply; I rode after him until I saw him halt, and then Mephisto and I lay down, saw what course he was taking, headed him off and waited."

"He mistook me for one of his pards, who, I now recall, all rode black horses, or dark ones, for he called out:

"Is that you, Frank?"

"Of course it was, and I answered in the affirmative, rode nearer, and he obeyed my order to hands up, so I know he is neither deaf or dumb."

"Well, a bird that can sing and won't sing must be made to sing, so just take off his head-gear, Dandy Dick."

The scout stepped forward, carefully raised the feather mask, or helmet, and the face that was revealed was certainly as disagreeable as one as had been the owl's.

Red-headed, the hair cut short, with a cropped sandy beard, bloated face, and small evil gray eyes, he looked like one who would be guilty of any crime, and possessed no conscience to reproach him for it.

"The owl's face was the handsomer of the two," said Texas Jack, with a light laugh.

But the man made no reply, only stared at his captors in a dogged kind of way.

"Now, my man, you must answer the questions I put to you," said Wild Bill.

"In the first place," he continued, "are you not one of the band known as the Red Owls?"

The man appeared not to have heard the question.

"You refuse to answer, do you?"

Silence alone gave assent.

"Now, pard, you have been taken with your colors on, and therefore we know you to be one of the Owls; but, as you are our first capture, and we wish to make a quick ending of our work in this part of the country, I am willing to make terms with you."

Still the silence and the dogged stare.

"Now, if I offer you your life will you answer my questions truthfully?"

No response.

"You seem determined not to reply, and you may fear that we will not put you to death; but let me tell you that you are mistaken, for I bear an official order from the general commanding this district, to put all of the Red Owl band to death, as I may capture them, for you have all been guilty of the basest crimes, and not one of you is there but deserves hanging."

"But I make an exception of you, to save time, and accomplish my ends, and offer you your life and your pardon, if you will tell me what I would know and aid us to capture your evil comrades."

"Now, what do you say?"

The man appeared like one who did not think

he was the one addressed, and no response came from his sternly-set thick lips.

"Don't think that you have fallen into the hands of missionaries, who will try to redeem you from your wicked ways, for you have not, as you may know when I tell you that we have all been heard from on the border, and we have seen blood flow, and are not afraid of death."

"That gentleman, who so cleverly took you in, is Doctor Frank Powell, the White Beaver Chief of the Winnebagoes, while this pleasant-faced youth is Texas Jack, and that tall man you may recall when I tell you his name is Major Frank North, or Fighting Frank, also a white chief of Indians, the Pawnees."

"Then we have Night Hawk George, Broncho Billy, Dashing Dan, Dandy Dick, Bravo Buck, and last, I am known as Wild Bill."

"Now that you know us you may perhaps be pleased to respond by introducing yourself."

The man's face had twitched nervously at the mention of the names; but he still preserved that stolid silence.

"You refuse to accept my offer, and talk?"

No reply.

"White Beaver?"

"Well, Bill?"

"You captured this man, so what shall we do with him?"

"He is in your hands, Wild Bill."

"You are sure he can talk?"

"Yes, for he hailed me."

"Then I will lose no time with him, as he is so stubborn, but carry out the general's orders."

"Buck!"

"Yes, Bill."

"Take Dandy Dick and Dashing Dan to aid you, place this fellow fifteen paces in your front, fire at the word and kill him."

"What say you, pards, to the sentence?" and Wild Bill glanced over the faces of his comrades.

"It is just, for the Red Owls deserve no mercy," responded Frank North, and the others nodded their approval.

"Once more, my man, will you accept your life on the terms offered?"

The captive did not show a sign that he heard the question, and Wild Bill said impatiently:

"Bravo Buck, you have your orders, so carry them out!"

Bravo Buck stepped forward and led the captive away a few paces, placed him in position, took his stand in front of him, with Dandy Dick and Dashing Dan, and Wild Bill called out:

"Speak quick, Red Owl, for we are in deadly earnest!"

Not a word came in response, and then followed the command:

"Fire!"

The three revolvers flashed together, and the man's lips were forever stilled by instant death.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN BORROWED PLUMAGE.

HAVING been so constantly on the go, of late, both men and horses needed a rest, and Wild Bill determined to remain in camp until late in the afternoon, when they could go to the spot where Belle Bradford had been captured and take up the trail there and see where it led.

With such a clear night of moonlight as the one just over, and it promised to be, he did not have any fear of not being able to follow the trail, once they had struck it, and he knew that all needed rest.

The dead outlaw had been buried, breakfast had been cooked, and was partaken of with a relish, and Texas Jack and Broncho Billy agreed to stay on the watch while the others slept, and both took up their positions at a point of observation that commanded the approach to the camp, and from such a distance that they felt, sleeping as they did lightly as a watch-dog, they too could rest.

White Beaver, however, seemed to feel not the slightest fatigue, and calling to Wild Bill, he said:

"I think I shall turn Red Owl for awhile, Bill."

"How do you mean, Beaver?"

"Well, there is that fellow's suit, rig-out and horse, and I might as well start out to see what I can discover in it."

"You know best, Beaver, and it's not a bad idea," responded Wild Bill, adding:

"But go slow, pard."

"I will; now how do I look?" and White Beaver drew on the owl's head mask.

"The Owls would never know you as a strange bird, Beaver," laughed Wild Bill, as he threw himself down to rest upon his blanket.

Putting on the buckskin suit of the dead outlaw, and mounting his horse as well, White Beaver rode out of the camp.

Leaving the timber of the creek, which here made a bend almost in the opposite direction, White Beaver struck out over the prairie, following his own trail of the night before.

Straight to the spot where he had been come upon the night before by Major Buckner and his party he went, and there discerned the trails that met, and the one that branched off toward the westward in the direction which Wild Bill had told him lay the ranch of Kent Kennard.

"I'll see just where this trail goes," said White Beaver, and he cast his eyes about him, when he discerned a horseman coming slowly over the prairie, his head bent down, as though he was following a trail.

To dismount and lead his horse away to a water-wash, some hundred yards away, was the work of a few moments.

But the gully was not deep enough to hide the horse and scout, and the persuasions of the latter were not sufficient to force the former to lie down.

"Down you must go, horse," said White Beaver, and quickly he threw the lariat about the animal's legs, and threw him flat on his side.

Then he lay down upon him, and was just hidden from the view of any one riding near.

"It struck me that I caught a glimpse of me one in the rear of the first horseman; but I had not time to take a second look, so must go slow, as Wild Bill says," he muttered.

Arranging some grass, which he cut off with his bowie-knife, in front of him, so as to hide his head, he peered through it out upon the spot where had occurred the mysterious capture of Belle Bradford by one who had proven himself to be miles away at the time.

Soon the rider's head came in sight, and he halted upon the scene of the kidnapping.

"It is that boy I saw last night, and whom Wild Bill says so pluckily accused the ranchero of being the captor of his cousin."

"Well, he's a plucky one, and he seems to be alone and trying to follow the trail himself; but I shall wait and see."

So saying, White Beaver waited for awhile, and then said:

"There he goes! off on the trail of the maiden and her capturer, whoever he was."

"I will follow him as soon as I am sure that he is not followed by some one else, for I cannot get it out of my head that I caught sight of some one else."

So he waited patiently for quite awhile, and was about to get up from his hiding-place, thinking that what he had seen must have been a buffalo, when suddenly a horseman rode into view.

He was dressed in buckskin, wore a slouch hat, rode a black horse, and was well armed, while his face was by no means a prepossessing one.

"That fellow is trailing the boy, certain, so I'll call a halt on him," and White Beaver stepped up from his hiding-place, his revolver ready in hand and advanced rapidly toward the stranger.

He was not seen until within good range, as the man was attentively regarding the numerous trails that branched off from that point.

His horse starting suddenly revealed the scout, and the man drew his revolver quickly, unheeding the ringing command:

"Hands up, pard!"

But he now saw that the one advancing upon him wore the Red Owl mask, and he lowered his weapon and called out:

"Who are you, pard, that you don't know your Red Owl comrade Brandy Ben?"

"Ho, Ben, is that you? Why didn't you speak sooner, for the sun in my eyes blinded me," and White Beaver walked straight up to the horseman, apparently trying to uncock his revolver, as an excuse for keeping it in hand.

"Wal, I don't git onter who yer is, pard, though yer colors is all right."

"Who is yer?" and the horseman looked suspiciously at the scout as he rapidly approached.

"Black Frank," answered White Beaver, remembering the name the Red Owl had called out the night before.

The result was unexpected to White Beaver, for the man dropped his hand like lightning on his revolver, while he called out:

"Black Frank hain't got white hands!"

With his words he fired, and the bullet struck the scout's pistol, knocking it out of his hand before he could fire, while the shock caused his arm to fall by his side, temporarily benumbed.

But instantly his left hand fell upon the revolver upon his left hip, and yet before he could use it his adversary fired a second time, the bullet this time cutting the feathers from the owl's head.

Ere he could fire again White Beaver drew trigger, and the man fell forward on the horn of his saddle, while his horse started to run.

But, quick as a flash the scout seized the bridle-rein and the rider dropped to the ground, a bullet in the center of his forehead.

"That was a close call for me," coolly said White Beaver, throwing off the owl-mask, and bending over the slain man.

"Ah! here is a badge of service in the Owl band."

And he drew out of a saddle-pouch an owl's head-dress like the one he had worn.

"This is number two of the Owl Rangers."

"Let me see. I cannot play Black Frank from what he said with white hands, so I will have to blacken them, or play Brandy Ben, the spirited name this gentleman hailed under."

"Let me see! I will bury him yonder in the water-wash and then hasten on after the boy."

"I am sorry I had to kill him, for he might

not have withstood the temptation offered his comrade, and kept silent."

So saying, White Beaver carried the body to the gully, released the bound horse and soon had him buried with the aid of the hatchet which he, too, carried at his saddle-horn, as the other outlaw had done.

Resuming his mask, he then mounted one horse, and leading the other rode at a gallop after the boy, who was now evidently a long distance ahead of him.

"Well, if we go on at this rate, the Red Owls, preferring death to talking, and having to kill others to keep from being killed and thus losing the chance of a dying confession through wounding them, we are in a fair way to wipe out the band and yet not find the girl if she is really their captive, as Wild Bill says he is convinced she is, her energetic lover, he thinks, being a member, if not leader of the outlaws."

Thus thinking half aloud, White Beaver rode on at a lope, the led horse following readily, until suddenly and seemingly from out of the earth came the startling words:

"Hands up! or I'll kill you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE YOUNG TRAILER.

WHEN young Brad Buckner returned home, with his father, their story was told to Mrs. Bradford, who was in deep distress at the loss of her daughter.

"It is some trick of that vile man, Richard, for he alone is guilty," she said to her brother, after the major had told her how Kent Kennard had proven an *alibi*.

"But that army officer's word could not be doubted, sister."

"I would doubt every one but Brad."

"He was with Belle, and he well knew Kent Kennard, and he is not mistaken, let that man prove as he will that he was not there."

"I know him but too well, and that he swore that Belle should never marry any one but him."

"During the war he was nothing more than a guerrilla, serving on both sides, as it pleased him, and there is nothing that he will not do, and I believe that he has intercepted the letters from Captain Ralph Reynolds, who you know in his last, brought by that army courier, said he had written often, and had received no reply."

"He said he had told Belle he would appear suddenly, and make her his wife, as it was hard for him to get away."

"Now I am convinced that Kent Kennard got these letters, in some way, and so determined to kidnap Belle, fearing she would in the end not marry him."

"But the power he holds in his secret over us, sister, should have convinced him that Belle dared not do otherwise," urged the major.

"But he is aware that Belle does not know this secret, and might disregard its value."

"That might be."

"I tell you, Richard, Kent Kennard has captured Belle, and no one else, and she is now hidden at his ranch, or somewhere else, and I think you should take your cowboys and go there and demand that he give her up."

"And have him make known the secret, sister?" said the major, in a low tone.

"Alas! I forget his power over us."

"No, we must wait and suffer."

This much did Brad Buckner hear, as he lay in his little room near where the major and Mrs. Bradford were talking, and he made up his mind that he would go the next day to the ranch of Kent Kennard and demand that he give up his dearly-loved cousin.

"He won't dare kill me, a boy, and yet I can kill him," was the thought in his mind as he dropped off to sleep, leaving his father and aunt still talking together in the sitting-room.

After breakfast the next morning he looked to his weapons most carefully, mounted his best mustang, and saying that he was going off on a hunt, rode away from the ranch, leaving his father and aunt still asleep, for they had not retired until dawn.

Straight to the spot where the kidnapping had occurred he rode, and after examining well the different trails, decided upon which was the one he wished to follow.

"That track is made by Rocket's hoof, I know, and nobody can fool me on that," he muttered, referring to the horse ridden by his cousin.

He little dreamed that the eyes of White Beaver were then upon him, or that his trail had been crossed some distance back and followed by the man calling himself Brandy Ben.

"Come, Fire-cracker, we must be in a hurry, for we are on Rocket's trail, and I think we can follow it to the end," he said, addressing his spirited little mustang, that started off at a swinging walk, seemingly following the trail of his equine comrade by instinct.

The boy had gone but half a mile when he heard the crack of a revolver, followed by a second and third report in quick succession.

The prairie was very undulating where he was, and he could not see very far around him, but his eyes fell upon a buffalo wallow not far away, and toward this he rode, the trail going close to the side of it.

Arriving there, he beheld the horns of a buffalo, and around it the grass had grown to a considerable height, so that the boy saw a safe hiding-place, or at least a place of defense should he be pursued by an enemy.

To ride into the wallow and make the pony lie down was but short work, and then he went on foot to the highest rise near him and looked around the prairie.

No one was in sight, and no more pistol-shots had he heard.

He knew that Indians or Red Owls were likely to be about, and he was aware that his life was in danger; but he was a fearless young fellow, and nerved himself to meet the worst.

After waiting a considerable time he concluded to go back to his pony and resume his trailing when, boylike, he leaped up into the air to get a better look before going.

As he did so his eyes fell upon the head and shoulders of a horseman coming over the prairie.

Again he sprang several feet into the air, and distinctly saw the coming horseman.

"He's following my trail, too," he said, as he ran back to the buffalo wallow.

Fire-cracker had gone to sleep, but awoke at approach of his young master and seemed anxious to be moving; but Brad soothed him, and lying flat down upon the prairie, gazed through the tall grass on the edge of the buffalo wallow at the point where he expected the horseman to appear.

He had not very long to wait ere the rider came in sight.

"It is a Red Owl!" cried Brad, as he saw the red feathers and owl's head.

"And he is leading a horse," he added, as he got his rifle ready to fire.

Nearer and nearer came the horseman, and then he came to a halt, closely examining the trail he was following.

Nearer and nearer, until suddenly from out the buffalo wallow, shrill and clear, came the words that end the foregoing chapter.

In an instant White Beaver recognized the boyish voice, and he threw his hands above his head, while he said, in his pleasant way:

"My hands are up, my boy; but I'm not a Red Owl, as you suppose, only masquerading as one."

"Come out and let us get better acquainted, for you caught me fairly off my guard."

"Who are you?" cautiously asked the boy, still keeping his position, and his rifle at a level.

"I am one whom you met on the prairie last night, when with your father, and am the friend of Wild Bill."

Brad was cautious, and extremely so for a boy.

He did not wish to be entrapped, or to fall into the hands of the Red Owls.

Here was a man before him, who certainly wore the mask of a Red Owl Ranger.

So he determined to "go slow," and said:

"What was that firing back on the prairie awhile ago?"

"I shot a Red Owl, who would not surrender, and this is his horse."

"Let me see your face, please!" and the request was more of a demand, for Brad still kept his rifle leveled.

"Certainly, my boy," and White Beaver took off the red head of the owl, and glanced at the youngster with a smile.

"I know you now, for my father and I spoke of your handsome face, and of your soft-toned voice after we left you," and White Beaver smiled at the innocent compliment of the boy, while he said:

"Well, my boy, I am glad to have met you, and I must tell you I was on your trail, for you passed near me an hour ago, and I would have hailed you then, only I had caught sight of the Red Owl on your track, and wished to ambush him."

"Now, let us have a talk together, and you must tell me all you know about this capturing of your cousin, and then I may take you into confidence, and together we must save the young lady and hang her kidnapper."

"Oh, sir, if you only would."

"What, hang the kidnapper?"

"Yes, sir, and save cousin Belle, too, for I know she is so wretched, and I don't wonder, for she has such a splendid sweetheart in Texas, who is captain of the Rangers there, and it will break his heart if she is forced to marry that rascal Kent Kennard."

"Well, she shall not, if the Dead Shot Nine can help it."

"Who are the Dead Shot Nine, sir?"

"You shall soon know; but you must keep the secret."

"Now to follow the trail left by your cousin and her captor, whoever he may be," and in a few moments more the two set off on the trail across the prairie left by the horses of Belle Bradford and the man who held her captive.

CHAPTER XV.

WHERE THE TRAILS ENDED.

WHEN White Beaver and the boy started upon the trail of Belle Bradford, the scout was anxious to discover if the tracks led them to the home of Kent Kennard.

He knew that the boy was well acquainted with the ranch of the daring lover of his cousin, and could give him much information that would be valuable to the party in carrying out their plans.

The Dead Shot Nine had arrived upon the scene of action, to find the maiden gone, and it was their intention to find her and punish her abductors.

There was a great deal of mystery connected with the affair, but this must all be cleared up.

The terrible band of Red Owls had been met face to face, and most ignominiously they had fled without firing a shot, though doubling the scouts in number.

What it meant the Surgeon Scout could not understand; but he felt that before Wild Bill gave up the trail he would solve all mystery and punish the guilty.

As he rode along with Brad Buckner, he gleaned from the talkative boy all the information he could regarding the country, the settlers, the town of Prairie City, and about Kent Kennard.

Brad told all he knew, so that White Beaver was pretty well posted when they came in sight of a distant ranch.

"That is the home of Kent Kennard, sir," said Brad.

"Yes, and the trails seem to lead just there."

"Yes, sir, for Kent Kennard, and no one else, kidnapped my cousin Belle," firmly responded the boy.

White Beaver gazed with some interest upon the ranch they were approaching.

It was located upon the banks of a stream, lightly fringed with timber, and upon a rise that approached almost the prominence of a hill.

It ended in an abrupt bank, some thirty feet high, on the stream, and sloped off gradually toward the prairie.

There were hundreds of cattle seen about on the prairie, with a cowboy here and there watching them, and a broad trail led to the stream, where there was a watering-place and ford.

About the ranch buildings there was a stockade wall some eight feet in height, with but one gateway, and inclosing a space of ten acres, one end of which was used as stock-pens, where cattle could be driven in case of danger, and the other for the cabins and outhouses, which were surrounded by well-kept vegetable gardens.

There was one large cabin, with six rooms, facing the stream, and it was strongly built and comfortable.

Then there were smaller cabins further away, for the men, a smokehouse, storehouse and a large stable for horses constantly in use.

"He has a snug home there, and as strong as a fort," said White Beaver, who was watching the place, as he approached it, through his field-glass.

He had taken off his owl's mask, and resumed his slouch hat, so that he had the appearance of a plainsman.

"Will you go on to the ranch, sir?" asked Brad.

"Yes, near enough to see if this trail goes directly to the gate, for I know the track now of the horse ridden by your cousin, and can tell it anywhere."

"Suppose Kent Kennard is there, sir?"

"Well, I will simply tell him I am following Miss Bradford's trail, to his house, and ask if she is there."

"He will say no."

"Then it will remain to see if he can prove it, for I shall return to camp and make my discovery known."

Brad seemed pleased, for there was something about this pleasant-spoken, handsome man that gave him confidence.

So on to the ranch they went, passing near two cowboys who eyed them significantly, but said nothing.

The trail led straight to the gate and then disappeared, and Brad said exultingly.

"I told you so, sir!"

"Yes, this looks bad."

"Hello, within there!" called out White Beaver.

"What's wanted?" said a gruff voice from the other side of the stockade, and his voice came through a small hole in the wood, from which he had evidently seen the approach of the scout and the boy.

"Is Captain Kennard in?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"In Prairie City."

"Has he any visitors at the ranch?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sart'in."

"Is there not a lady here?"

"No."

"A lady was out riding last night, got lost, and the trail of her horse leads here."

"She hain't here."

"Have you seen a lady come here?"

"No."

"Will you let us come in and await the return of your master?"

"I hain't got no master."

"Well, of Kent Kennard?"

"Nobody's allowed in when he's away."

"That's strange border hospitality."
 "It's safest."
 "Well, we will have to call again."
 "I don't care."
 "When do you expect him home?"
 "Don't know."
 "Come, Brad," and White Beaver turned away from the gate, the boy by his side.
 Riding up to the two cowboys, who were smoking their pipes under a tree, White Beaver said:
 "Good-morning, gentlemen."
 They nodded without reply.
 "Can you tell me when Captain Kennard will be at home?"
 "No."
 "The gateman says he is away."
 No reply.
 "Have you seen a lady on horseback crossing the prairie since yesterday?"
 "No."
 "Have you seen any Red Owls about here?"
 "No."
 "Do you know Wild Bill?"
 They started, and eyed the scout slowly, while one said cautiously:
 "We has heard o' him."
 "He has not been seen about here to-day?"
 "No."
 "Gentlemen, I bid you good-day," and White Beaver bowed with mock politeness.
 "Who is you?" called out one of the cowboys.
 "Have you ever heard of White Beaver, the Surgeon Scout?"
 "We has, and he's a dandy to kill."
 "I am he," and White Beaver rode on, while one of the cowboys gave a long whistle of surprise.
 "Well, Brad, we found out where the trail led, and the manner in which Kent Kennard's men treat us convinces me that there is something wrong in his ranch."
 "Now come with me to my camp; but you will have to keep the secret."
 "I will, sir," said Brad, delighted at feeling himself growing into such importance as to have a secret with, and be the companion of, noted scouts of the plains.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHASING AN APPARITION.

It was late in the afternoon when White Beaver rode into the creek timber, where the Dead Shots were encamped, Brad accompanying him, and the outlaw's horse following behind.
 Wild Bill had allowed all to have an easy, restful day of it, for he had much confidence that White Beaver would bring back good news, so that even the sentinels had taken a good sleep.
 The result was that all felt refreshed, and had just gotten off their blankets when White Beaver was reported coming across the prairie, and not alone.
 Some of the men began to get a dinner and supper combined, others led the horses to water, and Wild Bill, Night Hawk and Frank North awaited the coming of White Beaver.
 "By Jove, but the boy is with him that I met last night, and he's clean grit tooth and nail," said Wild Bill, recognizing little Brad, as they drew nearer.
 "It is strange that he should bring the boy to camp," remarked Frank North.
 "Oh, he's got good reasons for it, you may be sure; but he has a led horse, too."
 "That's so," put in Night Hawk George, and the interest in the coming of the Surgeon Scout increased, until, by the time he rode into camp, all the men were there to receive him.
 "Well, Beaver, we are glad to see you," called out Wild Bill.
 "Thank you, Bill, and I have brought a friend whom you'll remember, Mr. Brad Buckner, gentlemen, the pluckiest boy of his inches on the plains," and at the introduction Brad doffed his slouched hat politely and sprung to the ground, while the Dead Shots, not to be outdone in politeness, returned the courtesy.
 "Bill, I have not had a useless ride of it, I assure you, since I left camp this morning, as you will see when I have told you my story."
 "No, Beaver, it isn't your style to make useless trips, and I'll wager we will know just what to do now."
 "Thank you; but you shall hear all that I have to say, and then decide."
 "I struck for the spot where Miss Bradford was captured, and following her trail, took cover when I saw some one coming."
 "At the same glance I thought I saw a second horseman, and so concluded to go slow."
 "This young man passed my hiding-place, and I saw that he was following his cousin's trail; but I let him pass on, and waited."
 "I had begun to think what I had seen following him was a stray buffalo, when into view came a horseman."
 "He looked like a scout, but I determined to try him on, so advanced from my hiding-place, and he called out not to shoot, for he was my pard Brandy Ben."
 "Then he asked who I was, and upon my re-

plying Black Frank, he said my hands were white, so I could not be the man I claimed, and he opened fire.
 "He meant well, for his bullet shattered my revolver and numbed my hand for a few minutes, and by the time I got my left on my other pistol his second shot cut off some feathers on my owl's head."
 "Then his target practice ceased," significantly said Frank North.
 "Yes, for I shot him, and I saw that he was also a Red Owl."
 "I buried him decently, and borrowing his horse, weapons and head-dress, set out on the trail of Brad, here, and he was laying for me, caught me napping, and made me hands up quick."
 "I convinced him that I was not an Owl, and we went together on the trail of Miss Bradford, tracking it directly to the gate in the stockade surrounding the ranch of Kent Kennard."
 "Then you were right, my boy, and I wish I had pushed matters against that man last night; but his testimony seemed so complete, as to his having been in the Overland Palace saloon all the afternoon and evening, that I had to give him the benefit of a doubt."
 "Yes, sir; it did seem as though I was mistaken; but I know Kent Kennard well, and he and no one else took my cousin away," remarked Brad.
 "Well, we will get at the truth of it all, my boy, and if he is guilty, woe be unto him."
 Then turning to White Beaver Wild Bill continued:
 "We must look to our laurels, Beaver, or you'll get away with the whole nest of Owls before we have a chance at them."
 "Accident has helped me, Bill; but I learned much from my young friend here, and, as I feel sure he can keep a secret, I asked him to come by camp with me, that you might make what inquiries of him you wished and then have him return home and leave all in our hands."
 "I would like to go with you, sir," said Brad.
 "No, my son, you cannot do that; but we give you our word to find your cousin, be she dead or alive, and more, to punish those who carried her off."
 "Now have some dinner with us, and after a rest start home, for it will be night ere you get there."
 "I don't mind that, sir, for I know the prairies well."
 "Had some of us not better go with him, Captain Bill?" asked Night Hawk.
 "Oh, no, sir; please don't do that, or you'll make me believe you think I am afraid," urged Brad, in terror at such a thought crossing the minds of his scout comrades.
 All laughed at his earnestness and then sat down to dinner, which was heartily enjoyed, after which Brad bade the Dead Shots good-by and rode away on the trail to his home, while White Beaver sought a few hours' sleep that he felt he needed, leaving his companions to clean up their weapons, rub down their horses and get ready for the night's work, for Wild Bill had said:
 "Pards, we will take the trail to-night to Kent Kennard's ranch."
 Upon leaving the camp of the scouts Brad Buckner felt years older than he had in the morning.
 There were men among the Nine Dead Shots who had been his ideal heroes since he could first read of their exploits, and he not only had seen them, but eaten in their camp, and his advice had been asked regarding many questions, for they had soon seen that he knew the country remarkably well and was far beyond his years in information and pluck.
 Leaving the recovery of his cousin in such hands, he felt content, and rode on his way with every hope that he would see her before long, safe and well.
 He had pushed Fire-cracker pretty well during the day, and so let him go at a slow pace homeward, for he was not anxious to arrive early, as he did not expect his father and aunt would be alarmed about him.
 The sun set while he was yet miles away, and as he drew near the spot where his cousin had been taken from him, and which he had to pass on his way to the ranch, the moon appeared above the prairie horizon.
 The sky was as clear as crystal, the stars shining with radiant luster, no mist was in the air, and all about him was visible with remarkable distinctness.
 Suddenly he halted, and an exclamation escaped his lips.
 He was on a rise of the prairie, and straight before him, just soaring above the horizon, the moon looked like a huge ball of fire.
 But that was not what surprised him, for he had watched its coming up and enjoyed it.
 That which brought him to a sudden halt, and forced from his lips a cry, was at seeing, photographed, as it were, upon the moon's face, a horse and rider.
 A moment he glanced at it, and then a glad cry came from his lips, and Fire-cracker bounded forward as he felt the spurs suddenly driven into his flanks, and which caused him to start with anger.

No, there could be no mistake, for that horse he well knew.
 It was Rocket.
 And more, the rider he knew still better.
 It was Belle Bradford.
 Like the very wind he sent Fire-cracker flying over the prairie, directly toward the rising moon.
 The horse and rider could not be very far away, and they had seemed motionless.
 The moon had risen up from the prairie horizon, but there, in the ray of light, still remained Belle Bradford, seated upon Rocket.
 The maiden seemed to be awaiting his approach, though without the moon for a background he could not tell.
 Nearer and nearer he drew, now dashing down a slope, and then ascending the rise upon which she stood.
 Fire-cracker stumbled, and it took the gaze of the boy momentarily off of the maiden.
 When he had gathered up his reins and again looked, she had disappeared.
 "Oh! she thinks I am some enemy and has run," cried the boy, and again did his mustang feel the digging spurs.
 Up to the summit of the rise he went, and then he glanced over the prairie.
 Where she had been was the spot where she had been captured.
 Now she had gone, but some distance away was the horse and rider at a standstill.
 "Cousin Belle! cousin Belle!" he cried in a voice that rung over the prairie.
 Back to his ears came mocking laughter that fairly startled the brave boy.
 "Cousin Belle! cousin Belle! don't run from me, for I am Brad."
 "Please wait for me!" and he shrieked the words almost, as with another mocking laugh that grated harshly upon his ears, the horse wheeled and dashed swiftly away across the prairie.
 Amazed and frightened Brad pursued, cruelly using his spurs; but he saw that Rocket gained rapidly, heard the mocking laughter, and beheld a white handkerchief in the moonlight, waving to him a farewell.
 "Oh, Lordy! cousin Belle is dead, and that must be her ghost," groaned the poor boy, and that moment Fire-cracker went down heavily, pinning his young rider beneath him.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE PURSUIT.

REFRESHED by several hours' sleep, and a hearty meal, the Surgeon Scout was as ready for the saddle as were his comrades; in fact his iron frame was capable of undergoing more fatigue than is generally allowed to the lot of man.
 It was just twilight when the Dead Shots moved out of the ravine.
 Having fallen to the lot of Dashing Dan to serve as "stock-tender" and "train-master," he led the two horses which White Beaver had captured from the outlaws, and which the scouts were glad to have along.
 He was also to hold the horses of the others, if they found it necessary to make a move on foot.
 They had not gone very far before the moon rose over the prairie, and Wild Bill remarked:
 "I think I should prefer darkness to-night rather than moonlight."
 "It would be better for approaching the ranch," returned White Beaver, who rode by his side.
 "We've got to take things as they come; blow hot, or blow cold, daylight or darkness, it's all the same to me," remarked Texas Jack, in his light-hearted way.
 "We go straight to the spot where the girl was captured, and then follow the trail, which you know, Beaver," Wild Bill said, as they held on in that direction.
 "Yes, for that trail leads us to the gate of the ranch, which we wish to go to first," responded the Surgeon Scout, and the party rode on in silence, two by two, Dashing Dan bringing up the rear with the led horses, which seemed to have been well trained to follow.
 Arriving near the spot, as if one man held the rein of every horse, the nine men halted.
 There, full in the moonlight, was a horse and rider, upon the trail, where Brad had said that Kent Kennard had captured his cousin Belle.
 "It is the girl, by all that's holy!" cried Wild Bill, in suppressed tones.
 "Yes, it is the girl, and she seems to be watching us, as though not knowing whether to run or not," answered White Beaver.
 "Suppose you hail her, Bill, as it might frighten her to ride toward her," suggested Night Hawk George.
 "You are right, George, I will," answered Wild Bill, and raising his voice, he called out:
 "Ho, lady, we are your friends, not foes!"
 No response came, though the horse seemed to move uneasily.
 "Call again, Bill!" said Frank North.
 "Miss Bradford! we are your friends!" repeated Wild Bill.
 Still no response.
 "Say, Broncho Billy, you are a lady-killer, so suppose you ride forward alone and see if

you can get her to talk to you," said Wild Bill.

"Yes; if she'll wait for any one, she will for Billy Blue Eyes," Bravo Buck remarked.

"He's after bein' sich a delutherin' cuss among the leddies," Texas Jack said with a rich Irish brogue.

And the scouts laughed, while Broncho Billy, who was also known as Blue-Eyed Billy, returned:

"I'll try her, but odds on it that she runs away."

And he rode slowly forward.

The maiden had her eye upon him as he approached; that seemed evident.

But she did not move, and seemed to be urging her horse to remain quiet.

"Blue Eyes is charming her," whispered Dandy Dick.

"He's the boy to do it," responded Bravo Buck.

"Begorra, no! he's skeert her entoirly," cried Texas Jack, as the maiden was seen to suddenly wheel her horse, and, with a ringing laugh, dart away.

Broncho Billy halted and looked back to Wild Bill for orders.

Instantly the scouts spurred forward, and coming up with Broncho Billy, Wild Bill said:

"She has gone, pard."

"Like a flash; but I got near enough to see that it was the girl the boy described as his cousin."

"I never doubted that; for who else could it be?"

"That's so; but she's halted."

It was true; the maiden had come to a halt after riding a short distance.

"Try her again, Will," said White Beaver.

"Yes, go alone, for she certainly will run if we all move toward her."

So Broncho Billy moved off once more and directly toward the maiden, who had again halted on a rise of the prairie and stood facing them.

"What a wild laugh she gave," said Night Hawk George.

"I noticed it," responded his brother, White Beaver.

"There was nothing for her to laugh at," Frank North rejoined.

"Boys, I don't half like this; but see! Billy is very near her once more."

And Wild Bill leveled his field-glass.

"Hark! he is speaking to her," cried Beaver, and all heard Broncho Billy's voice.

But again came the mocking laughter, and once more the maiden bounded away.

The horse of Broncho Billy sprung forward a few lengths, as though his rider were urged to follow her, but then he was checked, and stood awaiting the coming of the scouts.

As they reached Broncho Billy the maiden was seen to again draw rein and face them.

"Well, Billy, she won't be charmed?" said Wild Bill.

"No, and I tried my most dulcet tones upon her, telling her I was the friend of the fatherless, and no enemy, or words to that effect, and she gave that laugh, which I don't like, and went off like mad."

"Wonder if the girl hasn't been killed, and that isn't her ghost?" said Dashing Dan from the rear.

"Nonsense, Dan, you've been superstitious ever since you attended that Irish soldier's wake, when he was drunk and not dead, and got up and run the gang out of the camp," Texas Jack replied.

"I'll admit he scared me, and that girl does, too, with her strange conduct," rejoined Dashing Dan.

"Bill."

"Well, Beaver?"

"I do not half like that girl's laugh, for to my ears, as a physician, it has a mad ring."

"Yes, Beaver."

"Let me go forward alone, Wild Bill, and see if I can get near her; but if not, and she runs again, I will pursue and come up with her, for Mephisto certainly can catch her."

"Do you think it right, Beaver?"

"Well, I look at it in this way."

"The girl may have had enough trouble since her capture to turn her mind, and having escaped, as she seems to have done, she does not know the way home."

"Now, it will not do for her to run about these prairies, and in a short chase I think I can overtake her, and then, if she is brain ill, I can help her."

"You are right, Beaver."

"And another thing is strange to me."

"Well?"

"Do you not observe that she is following her own trail?"

"You are right; she is going along the trail her captor carried her, and toward his ranch."

"She is, indeed, and if she does she will be again taken, so I will try and capture her."

"Do so, Beaver," said Wild Bill, and the Surgeon Scout settled himself well in his saddle for a run if necessary, and rode on ahead of his comrades, going at a slow trot directly toward the horsewoman, who calmly awaited his coming, as she had with Broncho Billy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A HOT CHASE.

UNTIL the Surgeon Scout had approached, even nearer to her than she had allowed his brother, Broncho Billy to come, the maiden remained.

So sure were the band of scouts that White Beaver would be allowed to go up to her, that Texas Jack said pleasantly:

"Broncho, the Doctor has cut you out this time."

Having gotten quite close to her, White Beaver drew rein, for he did not wish to startle her, and he said in his pleasant voice:

"Good-evening, Miss Bradford."

"I hope you are convinced now that we are your friends?"

A wild, mocking laugh that grated most harshly on the ears of all who heard it, was the only response, and away bounded the horse, bearing his rider swiftly onward.

But at once White Beaver started in chase, saying in a low tone to his horse:

"Come, Mephisto, yonder animal is akin to the wind in speed, but you must run alongside of him."

"Come, old fellow, come! for he is dropping you."

At seeing White Beaver dart away in pursuit of the maiden, Wild Bill called out:

"Now, boys, we must keep as close as possible, for that is a fast horse the girl rides."

Away they went at a sweeping gallop, Dashing Dan keeping well up with the led horses.

"She is gaining on the Doc," cried Texas Jack.

"She is for a fact," Frank North added.

"You are right, pards; the girl is leaving him," Wild Bill said, somewhat anxious.

"What is the matter with Mephisto?" Night Hawk George asked, as he well knew what his brother's black could do.

"Nothing is the matter with Mephisto, George; it's with the other horse, and he's out-footing Frank's pride," observed Broncho Billy.

"We are riding very fast, pards, as you see, and White Beaver is dropping us rapidly; but I don't wish to push our horses too hard unless there is need of it; but you see that girl is mounted on an animal that is faster than any we have, as is seen when she drops the Doctor as she does."

"How's your horses, Broncho?" asked Frank North.

"Fast, but Mephisto leads any in the pack; but Frank's holding his own now."

"Shoot out on Lightheels, Broncho, and see if you can come up with them," said Wild Bill, and Broncho Billy's horse darted away like an arrow, as though understanding the order of the scouts' captain.

Rapidly he gained for a while, and then, as though observing that a second horseman had left the band of scouts, the maiden again urged her horse to greater speed, and once more began to gain, while Broncho Billy soon saw that Mephisto was also leaving Lightheels, who was doing his best.

"That girl is splendidly mounted; but then she's light weight."

"Still, if her horse can stand that pace far he is a marvel, and I'll pay high for him," muttered Broncho Billy.

In the mean time it had been a very great surprise to White Beaver, when he called upon Mephisto to do his best, to see that Rocket—for he knew the name, from Brad Buckner, of Miss Bradford's horse—was leaving him.

"He cannot drive far at that gait," he said, and so he did not urge Mephisto hard, believing that the maiden would soon break her horse down.

But as he saw that Rocket still held his speed, and ran as though not in the least distressed, he began to change his opinion of his lacking bottom, and so urged Mephisto the harder.

Thus some distance was gone over, the maiden holding steadily to the trail which led to the ranch of Kent Kennard.

On like the wind flew the two horses, and glancing back over the moonlit prairie, White Beaver beheld Broncho Billy coming a few hundred feet behind him, though he did not recognize who he was, and behind him the other seven scouts riding in a group and on a run.

"Some one is trying to help me, thinking Mephisto is failing from some reason; but they do not know the horse he is chasing."

"Now come, old fellow, and catch that fleet-footed fellow ahead," and the splendid horse increased his pace.

But the girl did the same, and thus she kept him at the same distance, though both were running away from Broncho Billy.

"On, Mephisto, or that mad girl will reach the ranch before you catch her."

"On, sir!" and White Beaver spoke sternly.

The obedient horse did still better, but Rocket held him where he was as soon as his rider saw that her pursuer was slightly closing the gap.

"Here, Mephisto, this won't do, and I must try the spur," and for the first time in his life the splendid beast felt the spurs pierce his flank.

A snort of rage and pain followed, and the animal fairly bounded high in air, at the same time increasing his speed at a great rate.

A startled cry came from the girl at this, and then was heard the swish of the keen lash falling upon her horse, and he too snorted with fright and anger, and ran the more speedily, again holding the scout where he was.

Angry at the speed developed by the maiden's horse, White Beaver now bent to the work of overtaking him, and he spurred Mephisto hard, and the animal seemed to slowly gain.

But so slowly was it that it was hardly perceptible.

Then, too, came the sound of the whip falling on the other animal, and he once more gained slightly.

"This won't do," hissed White Beaver through his shut teeth, and he began to throw off his fatigue coat.

Into this he wrapped his hat and rifle, and rolling them up in his serape taken from behind his saddle, he dropped them gently on the prairie, leaning far down to do so.

"There go a dozen pounds," he muttered.

Next followed his holster revolvers, belt of arms, haversack, surgical case and roll of clothing, with his oil-skins and blankets.

"There go twenty-five pounds more."

"Now, Mephisto, you have thirty-seven pounds less weight, so catch that horse!" and the Surgeon Scout let the animal feel the full force of the spurs.

Maddened and frightened, for his master had never before so used him, the noble steed fairly flew over the prairie, and the lighter weight began to tell, for the scout saw that he was gaining, and well.

The maiden realized it, too, and fast and furious rained her whip upon the back of her horse, and he, too, once more began to gain, and the speed of both was terrific.

But this mad pace could not last very much longer White Beaver soon saw, and as he glanced ahead, he said, grimly:

"Nor will it have to, for yonder is the Kennard ranch."

The scouts were not visible now behind him, and the maiden was still half a hundred yards ahead, while the ranch was but the sixteenth of a mile.

There were no cattle grazing on the prairie now, no cowboys were visible, and at the ranch no light shone.

Seeing it, the maiden broke forth in another burst of wild laughter and soon after dashed up to the stockade gate.

Hoping to capture her before she could enter, White Beaver was boldly following, when suddenly the gates swung open, and in through them she rode, they closing quickly behind her.

Expecting a shot, the scout wheeled quickly about and rode back to meet his companions, his horse panting under the long, hard run.

Getting out of range, he halted, and began to caress the noble animal, while he rubbed his spurred flanks with bunches of grass.

Soon up came Broncho Billy, and he called out:

"You didn't catch her, Frank?"

"No, though I threw off all the weight I could."

"I picked up your rifle and things, and felt sure you would catch her when I saw how much in earnest you were."

"Here they are, and yonder come the boys."

The scouts soon came up, and Wild Bill said:

"Well, Beaver, she outfooted you?"

"Yes, and has gone into the stockade gate, which was opened for her."

"Then into the stockade we must go."

"I have a plan to get in by strategy, Bill."

"All right, for it would be rough work to storm the place, so out with it, Beaver, and we'll back you," said Wild Bill, with the air of one who was aroused to do any act of daring to recapture the maiden from Kent Kennard.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHITE BEAVER'S STRATEGY.

FOR a moment after Wild Bill spoke, White Beaver stood in deep thought.

Then he said:

"Mephisto has had a hard run, so I'll leave him with you, Dashing Dan, and mount one of the Red Owl horses, while I will also rig myself out as one of the band and ride up to the gate."

"With the moon where it is, my face can be seen and recognized by whoever is at the gate, so I'll get there."

"But to make it more sure, I'll ride back on the prairie, approach the ranch from over yonder, and when you see me get a trifle past you, start as though in chase of me."

"I'll run at full speed for the stockade, and the man there will recognize me as a Red Owl being pursued and let me in, and I'll soon see that the gate is open for you."

"Yes, Beaver; but you take big chances."

"Not with the disguise."

"But you assume that Kennard's ranch is really the haunt of the Red Owls?"

"Certainly; for he would not dare have kidnapped that girl unless he had the outlaw band to protect him."

"We know that they are somewhere on the prairie and that they have a haunt near, and this must be the place, for toward the stockade,

when I was here to-day, came a score of different trails, and that was about the number we stampeded last night."

"I hate to see you go alone."

"Oh, I'll take care of myself."

"Let me put on the other disguise you have and go with you."

"As you please, Bill; but I think the strategy would work better with one than two."

"I'm only afraid you'll get into an owl's nest on entering."

"I'll play Owl, you may be assured, and open those gates so that you can enter."

"I don't believe there are many men at the gate, doubtless only one on watch, and I'll manage him until you come up."

"True, you can do that, and the girl must be rescued, while I see no other chance of getting admission, and the boy said, you remember, that Kennard had some dozen men at his ranch."

"I don't mind the number with the boys we have here, if we can only get a foothold, and my plan is about the safest, I think."

"I can suggest no other, except to charge up to the stockade, scale it, open the gate and fight it out."

"It would cost too many of our little band, Bill."

"No; let me go as I suggest, alone, and I'll call out that I am Brandy Ben, whom I killed, and whose voice I heard just enough to imitate, and I'll shout a warning, too."

"They'll let me in, I'm sure, and the surprise I give whoever is there will give me a chance to open the gates for you."

"Now I'll make my toilet and be off."

Ten minutes after, rigged out in his Owl's head-dress, White Beaver mounted the horse of the slain Brandy Ben and rode away across the prairie.

He made quite a long circuit, for fear some one might be watching him with a glass from the stockade, and then approached the ranch from another direction.

Arriving within a quarter of a mile from the gate, he suddenly saw coming toward him at a run his scout comrades.

They were riding as though to try and head him off.

He gave a pretended shout of alarm, and dashed for the stockade at the full speed of his horse.

It looked like an exciting chase, with the chances in favor of the pursued, and gaining on the others, as he intended to do, White Beaver started up the slope for the gateway, calling out, in a voice well feigned to resemble the tones of the man he had slain:

"Open the gate! ho there, pard!"

Almost instantly came back the cry:

"Who are you?"

"Brandy Ben!"

"Ay, ay, I see you now, Ben! all right!" was the reply, and the gate was at once thrown wide open.

Into it, at full speed dashed White Beaver, and quickly the gate closed behind him, while the man shouted:

"Come, Ben, sound the tocsin, while I open fire on those devils, or they'll be over the stockade before we can check them."

White Beaver saw the man spring to a rack, in which were visible half a dozen rifles of all sizes and calibers, for a lantern hung in the little shanty at one side of the gateway.

What the tocsin was, or where it was, the scout did not know, or care; but, quick as a flash he threw himself from his saddle, and, as the man threw the muzzle of his rifle into a small port-hole, to fire upon the coming scouts, he seized him in his powerful grasp, and hurled him to the floor with a force that nearly stunned him, while he said sternly:

"One word, sir, or one act of resistance, and you die!"

"Hold, Ben, what's up that you behave so?"

"This hain't square, and the cap'n'll hang you for it," whined the prostrate man, at the same time trying to slip his hand upon the butt of a revolver in his belt.

But springing forward White Beaver put his foot upon the arm with a force that nearly snapped the bone, and cried sternly:

"I shall have to kill you, my man, for I am not your friend, Brandy Ben."

"Now obey me, or I'll keep my word."

The man was cowed now, for he was half-dazed with surprise, and he said:

"I cries give up, pard."

"See that you act it as well," and White Beaver took from him his revolver and knife.

Then he ordered him to rise, and marched him to the side of his horse, when he took the lariat from the saddle-horn and quickly bound him, with a skill that evinced practice in just that kind of work.

Just as he finished his task, the hoofs of the scouts' horses were heard almost up to the stockade, and throwing down the inner bars, White Beaver opened the gates and stepped without, his prisoner held firmly in his grasp.

"Ho, pards! go slow!" he called out, raising his hand in warning.

Instantly all drew rein with a suddenness that showed long practice.

"Pards, I've got the gate, and have here the guard; but I do not know what more we will have to face, so come in softly and we'll hold a council of war, and find out what this fellow knows."

"I don't know nothing," was the sullen reply of the prisoner, whom White Beaver recognized as the same man whom he had seen at the gate on duty that morning.

"That remains to be seen, pard," said Wild Bill, and he stepped up to the side of the prisoner and placed his pistol-muzzle hard against his side.

CHAPTER XX.

A MYSTERY UNSOLVED.

THE guard at the stockade gate of Kennard's ranch was certainly in a tight place, with the Dead Shots about him.

He had not expected danger, and was therefore wholly taken by surprise when so cleverly captured by White Beaver.

Added to this, the other scouts coming up were enough to awe him.

But he nerved himself to what was before him, and when Wild Bill placed his revolver against his heart, he did not move or flinch.

"Now, my man, you are dealing with those who can be merciful, if there is need of their being so, and who can be merciless with cause, so I wish your answers to be governed accordingly, for your fate depends upon yourself," sternly said Wild Bill.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" boldly asked the guard.

"We are prairiemen, on a laudable hunt, and we intend to carry out our good intentions."

"As for a name, those who know us best call us Dead Shots."

"And who is that traitor?" and the man pointed to White Beaver, who still wore his mask of the Red Owl.

"Ah! you spoke without thinking, my friend, for you give it away that he, wearing the mask of a Red Owl, is a traitor to bring us here."

"So you, too, belong to the band which you accuse him of being a traitor to?"

The man felt that he had betrayed himself, and muttered an oath; but he answered quickly:

"A compact exists among the Red Owls not to harm this ranch, as its owner once saved the life of their captain, and that man, to lead you here, for whatever purpose you may have come, certainly turns traitor against the wishes of his chief."

"Ah! well said, and cleverly turned, pard; but it won't serve you."

"Now answer me: is not this ranch the retreat of the Red Owls?"

"It is not."

"What is it?"

"The prairie home of Captain Kent Kennard, a ranchero, and leader of the Kansas Vigilantes."

"A captain of what is supposed to be a law-abiding, crime-punishing band of Vigilantes, and yet suspected of being a leader of the Red Owl Rangers, the worst set of cut-throats that ever disgraced the border."

"He may be accused, but that don't make him so, and his actions are too open for him to be thought so by those who know him."

"That remains to be seen; but tell me, where is he?"

"In Prairie City."

"And his men?"

"The Vigilantes?"

"No."

"The cattlemen of this ranch?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"The Red Owls."

"They are not his men, but they passed here at early dawn this morning, going northward."

"You will find their trails around the north end of the stockade, and from there I do not know where they lead."

"They did not halt?"

"No."

"Broncho Billy, you and Bravo Buck take a look at those trails, but don't be gone but a few minutes."

The two scouts started off on foot, and Wild Bill continued:

"Where is your master's company of Vigilantes?"

"I have no master."

"Your chief, then?"

"In Prairie City."

"Ah! they dwell there?"

"Yes."

"And his cattlemen, or cowboys?"

"They drove the cattle to another grazing-ground to-day, down the creek some miles."

"How many cowboys has he?"

"About ten."

"Many cattle?"

"Pretty considerable."

"And who are here at the ranch?"

"About half a dozen, including the servants."

"Do you expect your master home soon?"

"He may come at any moment, and perhaps not for days."

"Where is his captive?"

"I don't understand you."

"Where is the lady who entered this stockade a while since?"

The man was silent and seemed a trifle nervous.

"Did you hear me?"

"Did you see it too?" he asked, in a hushed tone.

"See what?"

"It."

"What it, man?"

"The Ghost," he said, in a whisper.

"My man, don't take us for idiots, for we don't believe in ghosts."

"Nor did I until I saw it," was the answer, and the man's whole manner changed to one of nervous dread.

"Look here, sir," sternly said Wild Bill.

"Don't attempt to play us for fools, but tell me where the lady is that rode into this stockade an hour ago?"

"God only knows, pard, for I don't."

"Do you mean to say that no lady entered here?"

"I mean to say that a ghost did."

"You opened the gate for her?"

"I always do! but it's a spirit."

Wild Bill uttered an impatient imprecation and turned to White Beaver, and asked in a whisper:

"What is he giving us, Beaver?"

"I am watching to see if he believes what he says, or is trying to deceive us."

"And what do you think, Doc?"

"Question him more and I will tell you," answered the Surgeon Scout.

"You have the face to tell me that the woman on horseback, whom that gentleman chased across the prairies, and saw dash into this gate, is a ghost?"

"Yes, pard."

"And you believe it?"

"I do."

Just then Broncho Billy and Bravo Buck returned, and reported that the trails, some twenty, in number of horses, approached near to the gate, then turned off around the stockade to the north, going on up the creek bank in one solid trail.

"So far your story holds good, my man, regarding the trail of the Red Owls; but, Billy, do they approach the stockade here in one trail?"

"No, they come from different ways, just as we saw them scatter and meet near the gate and then form one trail, as though united, by all meeting here, if not together, going in a given direction alone, as to a rendezvous," answered Broncho Billy.

"Now, my man, we will return to the ghost."

"Well?"

"Who is it?"

"If you remember a young lady who was murdered some years ago in this part of the country?"

"No, I do not know it, but it appears to me that I recall something of the kind."

"I do," said Frank North. "She came out to these parts with a train, looking for her husband, and used to stop in Prairie City, if I remember aright, and rode out every day trying to find the man she was in search of."

"Some say she would be gone for days, and then turn up when they thought she was dead."

"She had money, and kept the best horses, and one day was found murdered."

"I remember that Buffalo Bill told me about it, for he knows her, and said her murderer had never been found."

"Is this the story as you know it, my man?" and Wild Bill turned again to the ranchman.

"Well, with a little difference."

"What difference?"

"You want to know all I can tell you, pard?"

"Yes."

"About the Prairie Specter, for that's what they call her hereabouts?"

"Yes."

"I don't like to talk about her, for she has scared me heaps of times; but I don't like that revolver of yours against me, and I suppose I must get talkative."

"It will be more healthy for you if you are, so out with your story, and be lively, for we have no time to lose, especially if we have to kill and bury you."

The man started at this, although he seemed, all along to realize his danger, and then began his story of the Prairie Specter.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PRAIRIE SPECTER.

"You see, pard," began the man, "I know the story as I heard it, and I can't vouch for what I don't see."

"Can you for what you see?" asked Wild Bill.

"Sometimes," was the laconic response.

"Well, to the story."

"I don't like to talk about the poor woman, for I have had enough frights from her."

"But they say she was murdered one moonlight night by some one up the creek a way, and a train coming down that way found her, and the men and women buried her, for it was an emigrant train."

"They reported in Prairie City what they had found and done, and some parties from there went out to see the grave, and be sure that no wolves should drag up the body, for everybody liked her, she was so young and beautiful."

"But when they got there it looked as though the grave had been disturbed, and digging down they found, not the lady, but the body of a man."

"He had been shot in the head, right in the center between the eyes, where the lady had been shot, and he was rolled up in his blanket, as she had been in hers."

"This was a surprise-party, pards, to all in Prairie City; but there was over a hundred folks in that train, men, women and children, and they all swore the same way about burying the woman there, described her, and there was no doubt."

"But the woman did not turn up, and the affair became a mystery in these parts."

"Now and then hunters came in telling how they had seen the same pretty woman—Lady Lucy they called her, for her name on the books of the Overland Palace was written Mistress Lucille Lester, but the boys got it L-u-c-y, for they get everything wrong in these parts."

"Then she was not dead?"

"Oh, yes, pard."

"Then how could the hunters have seen her?"

"They saw her ghost."

"Nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense, pard, for folks soon passed her, sitting on her horse, right across her grave, and when some brave fellows, as didn't believe in ghosts, tried to catch her, she laughed a mad kind of laughter, and ran right away from them."

"Now Captain Kent Kennard has about the fastest four-footed beast in these parts, and one that can go a long way in a full run, but he couldn't catch her, and one night he was hardy enough to shoot at her horse, emptying his whole rifle, for he's a devil when roused, and yet it did no good, for she laughed and ran away just the same."

"Was she seen afterward?"

"Man! didn't you see her to-night, and hain't I seen her a dozen or more times?"

"Yes, thirteen times to-night, and it's the thirteenth time that has brought me bad luck."

"Bah! you are as big a fool as the rest of the ghost-seers."

"Pard, I tell you that that woman hain't real; she's a spirit."

"She has come across the prairie here some nights, and I always opens the gate for her."

"The first time I saw her I was smoking my pipe when she rode up, and I let her in, thinking she was a lady friend of the cap'n's."

"She pointed to the gate with her whip, and I opened it, at the same time wishing her a good-evening."

"Lord! she looked at me and made no reply, but I remembered her big staring eyes."

"Well, I went over to breakfast in the morning, and asked who she was, saying a fine-looking lady like her might be civil."

"But they told me no lady had come in, and I got scared, for no one had seen her, and I had not let her out of the gate again, nor had she passed out, for the key of the padlock that locks the bar was in my pocket."

"Soon after she came again, and I told her she could not come in."

"Then her eyes blazed at me, and she pointed at the gate."

"I was scared, I can tell you, and I dodged back through the little shutter and opened the gate, for I had no power to do otherwise."

"Since then I always let her in, but how she gets out Heaven only knows."

"We will see if she has gotten out to-night," said Wild Bill, dryly.

"Well, pard, you'll see."

"Is there another gate?"

"Only a small one for humans, over on the creek, for no horse could go through it."

"Now tell me if you know Miss Belle Bradford?"

"I've seen her, pard, for she's been here with her uncle, to see Cap'n Kent."

"And when was she here last?"

"Some months ago, with her uncle and little boy cousin."

"She has been here since."

"I hain't seen her."

"Who else guards this gate?"

"No one."

"You alone attend to it?"

"Yes, pard, excepting when I go to my meals up at the ranch, and then one of the boys takes my place until I come back."

"And you say that Miss Bradford has not come in here since a month back?"

"No."

"When was your master here last?"

"Three days ago."

"And he was not here early last night, with Miss Bradford?"

"No."

Wild Bill turned to his comrades, for the man seemed honest.

"What do you say, Beaver?" he asked.

"Leave him a prisoner here, with Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick to guard him, and hold

the gate, while the rest of us search the ranch; but first let us find out just where the small gate is, that he speaks of, and we can send a man there to guard it, for our presence here does not seem to be known to any one else in the inclosure."

"A good plan, Beaver."

"You, Dandy, remain here with Dashing Dan; and Buck, you go to the little gate, for this man will tell you how to reach it, if he values his life."

"I'll tell you, pard, for this is a square ranch, and I've nothing to hide, while you seem to be acting with authority."

"But I would like to know which of the Red Owls that man is, for I know most of 'em, and it's not Brandy Ben, as he's always half drunk and has the flavor of a bar-room about him."

"Never mind which one he is; but he is one to soon let us know if you tell the truth."

"Now tell us how to find the little gate."

"Better follow the stockade wall around until you come to a group of trees, growing against it, and there is the gate."

"All right; now go, Buck."

"Mounted, Bill?"

"Can we ride there?"

"Yes."

"Go on horseback, then," and Buck started off.

"Now tell us how to get to the ranch cabins?"

"Why don't you ask your traitor Red Owl there, for many of 'em used to be cowboys here, before they took to the road-agency biz, and he should know."

"We prefer to rely upon you, and your life hangs by what you tell us true or false."

"All right, pard; I suppose I'm in for it, and it might be a sheep as well as a lamb."

"This trail leads right to the cap'n's cabin."

"Come, pards, we will be off, and five of us will go a little in advance on foot, you following, Beaver, with our horses, for, if there's to be hot work, we will need your aid as a surgeon."

So saying, Wild Bill moved off on foot accompanied by Night Hawk George, Broncho Billy, Frank North and Texas Jack, while White Beaver soon after followed with the horses, riding his own, and leading the other five.

At the gate remained Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick, with their horses, and the prisoner securely bound, while Bravo Buck had gone to hold the little gate on the creek side of the stockade.

With this arrangement, Wild Bill hoped to take and hold the ranch against any odds that might be there, in spite of what the guard had said, and all went prepared to face any peril that might come upon them, and the confidence they held in themselves had been gained after a long ordeal of deadly dangers in their wild life upon the far frontier.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STARTLING DISAPPEARANCE.

At the time Wild Bill and his comrades entered the Kennard ranch, they did not doubt but that they would find the maiden a prisoner there.

The story of the gate-guard they thought had been told them to give them a scare regarding the specter rider, though some of them had heard the weird story before.

Failing to have this effect, they had an idea that they would have to fight to get Belle Bradford out of the clutches of Kennard's followers, for that the woman on horseback, whom White Beaver had chased to the ranch, was other than the kidnapped maiden they had not the remotest idea.

They feared, by her returning to the ranch, that she had either gone mad, or having made some arrangement for her liberty, had met them on her way home, and fearing them, had returned to her captor rather than to them, it being surmised of course that she did not know them as they were.

Across the grounds then to the cabins went the six men, stretched out in a long line, their rifles ready, and themselves nerved for whatever might be before them.

Through the scattering trees, up to the first cabin, which was evidently a servants' quarter.

A light burned dimly within, and a knock at the door brought a reply:

"What is it?"

"The cap'n's come, pard, and wants yer," said Wild Bill.

"All right; is that you, Jake?" asked the voice.

"Yes, hurry up."

A moment after a man stepped out of the door, and a revolver confronted his vision, while strong hands grasped him upon either side.

"Whew! What are up?" he cried, in alarm.

"Who are you?" sternly demanded Wild Bill.

"Bouncer, are ther name is hitched to me here," said the man, taking his capture with strange coolness.

He was possessed of a herculean frame, had a red head, beard the same hue, and small, cunning gray eyes.

He was dressed as a cowboy, and had on his belt of arms.

"Well, Mr. Bouncer, we have paid a visit to this ranch to look for a young lady, whom we

know to be here, so if you aid us in our search all will be well with you; but if you give us trouble, you might as well spend your time from this minute in prayer."

"I don't know nothin' about no gal."

"Remember, no lies, if you value your life."

"Fact, pard! I doesn't know of no gal bein' here."

"Do you know Miss Belle Bradford?"

"Has seen her often."

"Was she not brought here day before yesterday evening?"

"Guess not, for I'd have known it; but ther man at ther gate, Foxy, kin tell yer."

"When did you go to bed?"

"An hour ago."

"And you saw no lady on horseback ride into the ranch?"

"Pard, has ther been a gal on horseback seen here?" and he spoke in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Then it were Lady Lucy's ghost."

"Don't give us any of that spirit talk, or I'll make a ghost of you."

"Who was the lady?"

"I tell yer it were ther Pararer Specter, pard."

"What do you do in this ranch?"

"Has an eye to bossin' it for ther cap'n."

"Where is he?"

"Like as not in Pararer City, gamblin' at ther Overland, fer he do love keards."

"How many more of you are there here?"

"Waal, he has a Chinee cook and servant, then thar's a Injun and his squaw, Chief Sal, and Squaw Sallie, we calls 'em, and they is Tonkaways from Texas, and friends o' ther cap'n."

"Who else?"

"Thar is ten cattlemen, but they is down ther creek at ther lower ranch with ther stock."

"No one else?"

"Nary."

"Your captain, two Chinamen, two Indians, ten cowboys and Foxy?"

"And me, Bouncer, fer I is somebody, as ye'd hev diskivered if yer hadn't caught me asleep."

"Yes, and you, making seventeen in all."

"Yas, pard."

"And how many Red Owls has he?"

"I don't catch on, pard."

"How many Red Owls has your captain under him?"

"Pard, he commands ther Vigilantes, ther Ranger Regulators, and don't go for outlaw work."

"Why do the Red Owls not attack his ranch then?"

"Waal, thar is them among 'em who would like ter, I don't deny; but then ther cap'n once, in some way, helped their chief out of a life scrape, an' so he won't hear ter this ranch bein' tackled."

"To hear you talk one would think only saints dwelt in the Kennard ranch, but now I intend to see if you have told the truth, so lead us to the Indians' camp."

"I'll do it," and the man led the way to a couple of skin tepees further on in the timber.

A camp-fire was burning low in front of one of the tepees, and at the sound of their steps a head was thrust out of the other.

"Tonkaway!" called out the man.

"Ugh!" came from within.

"Come out, fer yer is wanted, as thar is wishters here."

"Bring ther old lady, too, and tell her she needn't take time ter curl her front teeth and lace up her dancin'-boots, fer they is impatient varmints, and might git one'sy with ther waitin'."

Out of the tepee stepped a tall Indian, with a clean-cut, bold face, and following him was a squaw.

"They does ther huntin' fer ther ranch," explained Bouncer.

"All right; I want them to come with us."

"Now the Chinee," said Wild Bill.

"Yer'll skeer them China gents ter death, pard."

"Lead the way to them."

"I'll do it, for I'm a obligin' cuss when I can't help bein'."

And Bouncer started off once more, followed by the others, the Indians taking the situation most stoically.

Back of the main cabin, which was large and comfortable, was a smaller shanty, and here the cowboy stopped.

"They has some outlandish names o' the'r own, pard, but we calls 'em by Christian cognomens—that's a good word, hain't it?"

And the cowboy smiled blandly.

"Well, call them what you please, but make them show up."

"Hello, Salt and Pepper—that's what we baptized 'em one day in ther book, pard."

No answer came from within the shanty, and Bouncer continued:

"Say, Salt and Pepper, yer hed better stop out and git acquainted with some friends o' mine as is anxious ter know yer."

"Come out, or some o' 'em mayn't believe you is in thar and send a bullet a-huntin' fer yer."

The small door swung open and the two Celestials appeared.

The moonlight pierced the foliage and fell full upon them, showing that they were very much alarmed at what they beheld.

"Are there others in the shanty?" asked Wild Bill.

"Nary more," replied Bouncer.

"I want you with us."

And Broncho Billy took charge of the two Chinamen.

"Now, who is in the cabin?"

"Not a soul."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, pard."

"We will see."

And Wild Bill, leaving Broncho Billy to guard Bouncer, the Indians and Chinese, with the rest of his comrades went to the cabin.

"Hold on, pard, don't bust in ther door, for I hes ther key, and yer'll find a lamp handy on a table as yer goes in."

And Bouncer handed over a key to Wild Bill.

"White Beaver, you go in with me, while you, North, with Night Hawk and Jack, watch outside."

And Wild Bill and the Surgeon Scout opened the door and entered.

They found themselves in a large hallway, and a lamp was found and lighted.

At the rear end was a large fire-place, on one side of which was a door and a cupboard upon the other.

A table was near, and the place seemed a kind of dining-room and kitchen.

On the right a door led into a large room filled with all kinds of things pertaining to frontier life, weapons of various kinds, saddles, bridles, lariats, serapes, furs, clothing and many other articles.

On the left were two good-sized rooms, both bedrooms, and strangely well furnished for that wild land.

The front one of them, it could be seen, was the living room of the master of the ranch, and it was just as he had left it. There were a number of books on shelves, a guitar, a piano, a banjo, easy-chairs, a luxurious lounge, curtains to the window, a large fire-place, and innumerable little things to make the room attractive to the dweller therein.

The back room, opening into the hall, seemed to be reserved as a guests' chamber and was very comfortable.

Rude steps led up from the hall, through a trap to a garret, and wild Bill went up on a voyage of discovery, but found nothing to reward him.

Descending, he went with the others, upon a thorough search of the entire ranch, within the inclosure, and came to the gate where Bravo Buck had been sent.

But he was not there.

Then began a search for him, but without result, and, to add to their amazement, the scouts soon discovered that Dashing Dan, Dandy Dick and their prisoner, Foxy, had disappeared.

Then a careful search was made of the whole ranch by the scouts, the prisoners being carried with them; but not a sign of the lady rider, or their missing comrades and Foxy, could be found.

In some mysterious way all had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HOLDING THE FORT."

"PARDS, what are we to make out of this mysterious disappearance?"

The one who asked the question was Wild Bill, and he did so after the ranch had been thoroughly searched for the third time, by moonlight, and with the use of lanterns.

For once the brave scout was nonplused, and his comrades were in very much the same frame of mind.

It was no wonder, either, when they had pursued the horsewoman into the ranch, and then been very coolly informed that she was a specter.

They had not found her there, nor had they found matters different from what Foxy had represented them, after they had gotten into the ranch.

But they had been unable to find any trace of their comrades, who had so mysteriously disappeared from their posts of duty.

"I shall hold the fort, boys, and camp here," said Wild Bill, and so Frank Powell took the large gate, Texas Jack went to the small one, the Indians and Bouncer were securely bound, the Chinese being left free, and Broncho Billy was placed on guard over the cabin in which they were confined, while Wild Bill, Frank North and Night Hawk George continued their investigations as well as they could by moonlight.

The horses even of the three scouts had disappeared, along with those of the two Red Owls, whom they had with them, so there was no solving the mystery, try as they might, for certainly their comrades were no men to desert them, nor were they the kind to surrender without resistance, and not a shot had been heard, nor a call from them for aid.

When at length the long night wore away, and daylight came, the search for trails was begun.

To the surprise of the scouts not a trail could be found to show how the horses of their comrades had disappeared, and the most thorough search of all was fruitless.

"Well, we will remain here and work from this point."

"If Kent Kennard comes then he will have to answer to me, for there is some trickery in all this which he is doubtless at the bottom of."

"I only hope that no harm has befallen our comrades and the girl; but we hold this ranch and here we'll remain until the mystery is cleared up."

"Now you, Broncho, I wish to go off on a little expedition for me, and I'll tell you just what it is, and if you push right through you ought to get back within thirty-six hours."

Broncho Billy expressed himself as ready for the work before him, be it what it might, and soon after he rode away from the ranch at a gallop.

That they might have as little trouble as possible with the prisoners they were handcuffed with some irons found in Kennard's cabin, and then chained in the shanty, which rendered them secure without a scout to watch them.

"I hate to chain up the squaw like a dog, but she's as vicious as a snake, and would set them all free mighty quick," said Wild Bill.

The Indian chief bore his captivity like a stoic, the squaw was sullen, and Bouncer was seemingly indifferent.

The two Chinese had been given a warning by Wild Bill, and then set to work to do the cooking and camp work, and they appeared as well satisfied at it as though their former master was there.

The five remaining scouts then began to go over every foot of ground within the stockade, keeping a look to the approach of any one from the prairie that might be coming, and prepared to meet any foe they might come upon.

But the search, as before, proved useless; but Wild Bill did not give up, and while Night Hawk George acted as guard, to keep a lookout upon the prairie, he, White Beaver, Frank North and Texas Jack began to explore the creek shore.

The bank here was high, and the stockade wall ran along the edge of it, though there was little danger to be apprehended from a foe in that direction.

The creek was deep, for there was a bend there, and the current cut in under the bank, flowing swiftly.

From the stockade wall, on which Wild Bill stood, down to the water was some forty feet of precipitous bank, and on the other shore was a wild growth, or thicket, with marsh and bogs.

Beyond was the prairie, and its approach could be guarded from the stockade wall.

The ranch, being on a hill, was thus well located for defense against foes that might be ten times the number of those within the inclosure.

The Chinese gave the scouts a most excellent breakfast; but they seemed in little humor to eat, as the loss of their comrades weighed upon them.

Failing in finding any trace of the missing ones, they could do nothing but wait for coming events to develop themselves into something more substantial than the mysteries of the past.

While at dinner a hail from Night Hawk, who was on duty at the prairie gate, carried them to that point at a run.

Glancing out over the prairie they saw a horseman coming.

He was evidently a cowboy, and came on toward the gate with the air of one who suspected no danger.

As he drew near he called out:

"Come, Foxy, open your old trap and let me come in."

In response the gate swung open, and into the stockade inclosure rode the cowboy.

He drew rein suddenly as he saw that he was covered by several rifles, and he called out:

"What's up, pards, and who is yer?"

"The ranch has changed masters for the while, pard, and you'll do well to understand at once that you are a prisoner," said Wild Bill.

"It don't take spectacles ter see thet fact, pard; but whar's ther cap'n?"

"You mean Kent Kennard?"

"Yas, for he's boss here."

"You are mistaken, for I am boss here now."

"It looks it; but whar is ther cap'n?"

"In Prairie City."

"I guess not, for he was at ther corral ranch three hours ago, and told me ter meet him here."

"Are you one of his men?"

"I are, and my name's down as Cowboy Kit."

"And you came here to meet Captain Kennard?"

"I did, for a truth?"

"How long ago did you see him?"

"Three hours."

"Where?"

"At ther corral ranch that is his, and whar we hev ther cattle."

"How many of you are there?"

"Thar's nine left thar."

"And you say Kennard came there and told you to meet him here?"

"That's it."

"Where did he go then?"

"He tuk a trail to ther north'ard."

"Was he alone?"

"He were."

"Well, sir, you must dismount and take your chances with your comrades, for I have several of your friends here."

"Whar's Foxy?"

"The gate guard?"

"Yas."

"He escaped."

"Ah! And Bouncer?"

"He is where you soon will be."

"Whar is thet?"

"In irons."

"Ther devil!"

"Yes; you shall be put where you cannot escape."

"And ther Injuns?"

"You'll find them there."

"And ther Chinees niggers?"

"They are prisoners, too, though not in irons."

"Wal, I gives in, for I are clean tuk back, and no mistake."

"Jack, take the gentleman over to the cabin with the others and iron him well, while we wait here to receive Captain Kennard with all honors," said Wild Bill.

And a close watch was at once set for the discovery of Kent Kennard's approach.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LEADER OF THE RED OWLS.

I MUST now return to little Brad Buckner, who it will be remembered went down under his horse upon the prairie after seeing the strange horsewoman who had fled from the scouts.

The boy was temporarily stunned by the fall, and when he came to, found his pony feeding near.

He was dazed for awhile, and only with an effort overcame the feeling upon him.

Then he mounted Fire-cracker and started homeward, feeling rather sore all over.

In the mean time his father had become alarmed at his long absence, and accompanied by a cowboy had set out in search of him.

Crossing the stream, they saw Brad approaching slowly across the prairie and soon came up with him.

In a few words he told his father of his adventures, and swore him to secrecy regarding the presence of Wild Bill and his comrades in that part of the country and who had determined to find Belle Bradford.

As the two were talking together the cowboy, who had ridden some distance away on the prairie, suddenly came back at a gallop with the report that quite a number of horsemen were coming down the stream trail.

Instantly their horses' noses were muzzled and they all lay down in a buffalo wallow that they might see who were the strangers.

The moon was very brilliant, and soon the horsemen came in sight.

Major Buckner had his glass with him, and from his place in the grass turned it upon the men.

"Great God!"

The exclamation came in startled words from his lips, and he handed the glass to Brad, who quickly said, as soon as he had leveled it:

"It's the Red Owls, pa."

"It is indeed; but who is it at their head?"

Again the boy looked, and then handed the glass to the cowboy, while he said:

"You say who it is, Burt."

"Why, it's Cap'n Kennard," was the surprised remark of the cowboy.

"Yes, it is Kennard, and he alone of all the band wears no mask."

"Now he cannot deny what I have seen with my own eyes," said the major.

"He denied what I saw with my eyes," Brad returned.

"I cannot now believe that you were mistaken, my son."

"Just to think, the captain of the Regulator Rangers none other than the leader of the Red Owls!"

"No wonder this country is in a fearful state."

"You will report him, father, to the Regulators?"

"Alas, my boy, I cannot, I dare not."

"Did I dare do so, would I not have forced trouble upon him last night at the Overland? But he holds a power that I cannot despise, and I can only wait and hope."

"And let this man go on as he is, when you know he is a Red Owl?" almost indignantly said the boy.

"It must be so, at least for the present, and I wish you, Brad, and you also, Burt, to say nothing of seeing Kent Kennard with the Red Owls, but leave all for me to settle."

"Certain, major, if you wishes it; but I'd like to put a bullet inter him," responded the cowboy.

"See, they are going on down the stream, and not crossing, as I feared they intended, to pay me a visit."

"Let me see, there are just twenty-one of them."

"Yes, father, and they all seem to be mounted on black horses, while how strange those

owl-heads look in the moonlight," Brad rejoined.

Pausing within a short distance of the three in hiding, the Red Owls held on down the stream and soon disappeared from sight.

"Where are they going, I wonder?" said Brad.

"I don't know, but they are bound upon some deviltry."

"Now, Brad, you go on home and get some rest, for you need it sadly, and Burt will go with me to the town, and also see if it was really Belle you saw on horseback."

Brad wanted to go too, and hunt for his cousin Belle, though he felt that he was not able to do so; but his father was firm, and he set out alone for the ranch, while Major Buckner and Burt rode on their way toward Prairie City.

It was quite a long ride that the two took, and proved a useless search, and it was verging on midnight when they rode up to the Overland Palace and dismounted.

Landlord Sands met them at the door and gave them a welcome; for he was always a genial host.

"Glad to see you, major; and you too, Burt."

"Any news of the young lady, sir?"

"No, Sands, nothing that is cheering; but is Captain Tayloe, of the army, here?"

"Yes, major, you will find him in the saloon playing cards with Kennard."

"What Kennard?"

"Cap'n Kent Kennard."

Major Buckner started, and asked quickly:

"Is Kent Kennard here?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did he come?"

"I really could not say, major, for he has his room here, the past few days, and comes and goes at will."

"I will go in and see Captain Tayloe," said the major, and he entered the gambling saloon, followed by Burt.

There truly sat Kent Kennard, a cigar between his teeth, calm, cynical and handsome, as he played cards with Captain Tayloe, the army officer.

"You are too heavy for me, Kennard, for I can afford to lose only so much and must withdraw," said the army officer, as Major Buckner drew near.

Discovering the visitors, the officer arose and greeted him pleasantly, while Major Buckner asked, as he did not return the nod of recognition which Kennard gave him:

"May I inquire, Captain Tayloe, if Captain Kennard has been long in this saloon to-night?"

"I can answer for myself, Buckner."

"I came here half an hour ago," was the terse reply.

"From a ride upon the prairies?"

"No, from my room in the hotel, where I have been sleeping most of the day."

"You have not been out on the prairies to-day?"

"I have not; but let me tell you, Major Buckner, that I am not one to submit to being questioned by any man."

"You may, Captain Kennard, have to submit soon to being questioned by the Regulators," was the angry retort of the major, and he looked at the one he addressed in a menacing way.

But Kent Kennard did not change color, in the slightest degree, while he returned with a sneer:

"If I am questioned by the Regulators, sir, from any reason they may deem fit, Major Buckner will not be among that august body, though he may also be called before them to answer certain questions, which I, as their captain, might ask."

Major Buckner colored and then turned pale, while Captain Tayloe said quickly:

"Gentlemen, I cannot see that an argument between you two will result in any good, so I beg you to desist, while you, Major Buckner, I would like to ask if you have any news of your niece?"

"No, sir, no more than that she was seen to-night upon the prairie, but fled at the call of the one who saw her."

"This is strange, indeed; but was she mounted?"

"Yes, sir."

"And alone?"

"Yes."

"It is indeed strange; but she may have feared the one she met, and have fled, being on her way home."

"No, sir, for she had had ample time to come home, and had not crossed the stream at the place where she should have forded it."

"But who saw her?"

"My son."

"That wise boy again," sneered Kent Kennard."

"Yes, sir, and he is as positive that he saw Belle, as I and Burt here are that we saw you out upon the prairie to-night," retorted the major, quickly.

"Then your sight, like the boy's, is off, for I was not on the prairie to-night."

"Cap'n Kennard, you is a lyin' hound ter say that," yelled Burt, at the same time drawing his revolver and throwing it forward.

There were two flashes and reports, almost sounding as one, and then a heavy fall of a body.

"Your cowboy should have been quicker with his weapon if he intended giving me the lie, Buckner; but he meant well, for he has chipped a piece out of my shoulder."

"Perhaps you will see to his burial, as I have more important work to do," and Captain Kent Kennard left the saloon, while Major Buckner bent over the body of the cowboy.

"Poor Burt! he is dead, for the bullet pierced his brain," he said.

"Yes, Cap'n Kennard always hits dead center," responded one of the bystanders.

And giving to Sands, who just then came in, some money to have Burt decently buried, Major Buckner left the saloon accompanied by Captain Tayloe.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE SAME TRAIL.

"COME with me to my room, major," said Captain Tayloe, as the two left the saloon together after the tragic death of Burt, the cowboy.

In that wild place a man's death amounted to but a momentary excitement, and when it was explained that Burt had called Captain Kennard a liar, and then "drew on him," but "wasn't quick enough," no more questions were asked, though it was wondered, when Major Buckner was the cause, apparently, he had not taken up the cowboy's quarrel with the Regulator.

Upon going to the room of Captain Tayloe, Major Buckner found that it adjoined one that was occupied by the officer's wounded brother.

The two were pleasant quarters, and, with Sands for landlord, as far as the rooms were concerned, and the generously supplied table, the Overland Palace was by no means an unpleasant abiding-place; but, with the wild element about it, the danger of death, the drinking and carousing by night and by day, it was not a resort to seek for quietude.

"Be seated, major," said the army officer, politely, and Major Buckner dropped into a seat, considerably shaken up by the death of his favorite cowboy at the hands of the man against whom he dared not raise a finger.

"Captain Tayloe, what I say to you, sir, is in confidence, if you will so consider it," he began.

"Certainly, Major Buckner," and the officer got up and closed the door between the two rooms.

"Now, sir, what you say will not be overheard," he said, as he resumed his seat.

"What I would say, sir, is that my sister and her niece are from the South, and their kindred were in the Southern army."

"In their old home it was that they met Kent Kennard, at one time an officer, I believe, in the Confederate army, or at least he was so considered, and afterward a guerrilla."

"He had loved my niece then, and was refused by her, and when they came here to live with me, after the war, he also turned up in Kansas, to our great horror, for we fear the man greatly."

"He is a ranchero, has money, it seems, and is captain of the Regulator Vigilantes, or Rangers, though he is known to be one of the wildest, most desperate spirits on the border."

"Now, I am pained to say that he holds over myself and Belle and her mother a family secret of ours, and through this forced himself upon us in a friendly way, and more, forced us to consent that my niece should marry him, though he knows she is engaged to another, a young Texan Ranger and cattle-man on the Rio Grande, and whom she has known from her earliest girlhood."

"In consenting to marry Kennard, Belle did so from strategy, for she wrote to her lover, hoping he would come and in some way prevent it."

"I am now confident that this letter was intercepted by Kennard, for instead of waiting for the appointed time for his marriage, he met her upon the prairie, and, as you know, kidnapped her."

"So your boy said, my dear major; but, as I was witness to the fact that Kennard had not left the saloon that afternoon or evening, it certainly was not he."

"And yet, major, when I doubted my boy after all I had heard, I do not now, as I saw Kennard myself on the prairie to-night."

"And yet he says he was not away from the hotel."

"So he says; but I saw him, and more, so did Brad, my son, and that poor boy you heard call him a liar and lose his life for it."

"Where was he?"

"A long way from Prairie City, following a trail that runs along the bank of the stream near my ranch."

"He rode at the head of twenty men who were none other than the Red Owl Rangers."

"Hail can this be true?"

"It certainly is, for I saw what I assert, as did Burt and my son."

"I sent Brad to the ranch, and the cowboy and myself went to look up the woman on horseback, whom Brad said was his cousin Belle."

"And you could not find her?"

"No, sir."

"And then?"

"We came here, and both of us were taken utterly by surprise to find Kent Kennard playing cards with you."

"Major, I am not a gambler, sir, though fond of cards, and I played with that man to-night to study him, for he interests me deeply."

"He won from me, as he does from every one, and I was glad to get out of the game."

"He did not win from that splendid scout, Wild Bill."

"No; and I could not account for it."

"I did."

"How?"

"Wild Bill gave him warning that he would kill him if he cheated, and kept his eyes upon Kennard's hands, so that he had to play square."

"Ah! that may be; but what an adept at cheating he must be, as he is never caught, and always wins."

"Yes, Kent Kennard is a remarkable man."

"And so is Wild Bill."

"Ah! there you refer to one who is a wonder, from all that I have heard of him, and I hope to see more of him."

"I believe you will, sir, for I will tell you that he is now on the search for my niece."

"I am glad to hear this, for he will find her if man can do it; but what you tell me about seeing Kennard on the prairie to-night astounds me."

"Can he have a double?"

"It would be impossible to find his double in deviltry."

"That may be, and in looks, too, for he is a wonderfully handsome man."

"Yes, he is a magnificent devil; but, major, I wish to ask you, as you are here, to try and keep your eyes on the movements of Kent Kennard, and let me know when he is here, and when away?"

"I will gladly do so, major."

"The fact is, I have a brother who has been a pretty wild fellow, and he got wounded in a scrape, sent to the fort for me, and I am here to nurse him."

"Now Andy is improving, and he may be able to tell us something about Kennard."

"Come, and I will introduce him."

He led the major into the other room, and upon the bed lay a white-faced but handsome young man.

"Andy, this is Major Buckner, formerly of the army, and now a ranchero," said the captain.

"I have met Major Buckner before, and he will remember me when I tell him I am known here as Mexico."

"Ah, yes, you once saved my niece and myself from capture by a roving band of Indians, and we have always felt most kindly toward you, Mr. Tayloe."

"I wanted to accept your kind invitation, sir, to visit you, for you were good enough to say that you recognized me as a gentleman; but the fact is, I have an enemy by the name of Rum that has made a pretty hard case of me, and I would not go to where Miss Bradford was."

"My brother has not been a saint, major, for he was once an officer in the army, but got dismissed through dissipation, and went to Mexico, and then came here."

"That is why they dubbed him Mexico, and also, as he always wears the Mexican costume; but he intends to be a different man now."

"I hope so, and as soon as he is able to get out, I hope he will come to the ranch, for he can recuperate there more rapidly, and as I need a head ranchero, poor Burt being dead, the position is open to you, Mr. Tayloe, for I believe you have been a cowboy."

"Cowboy, teamster, hunter, guide, scout, soldier—in fact almost anything and everything, Major Buckner; but I accept with pleasure, and with thanks, the offer you make me, and will be ready for work in a week or so."

"Don't be in too great a hurry, for it was a bad wound you received."

"The man who gave it got a worse," was the reply of the reckless young borderman, who had killed his enemy after he had received the wound that had so nearly cost him his life.

"Now, Andy, tell us if you know Kent Kennard?"

"I do."

"Do you know if there is another man on the border that resembles him?"

"No, nor anywhere else, Arthur, I should swear, for he's not a man to match easy."

"What would you think if I would say he was captain of the Red Owls?"

"It would be just like him, in my humble opinion."

"Well, I wanted the major to hear what you had to say about him, and also to know if you thought it possible that he had a double on the prairies."

"The Lord made but one devil, Arthur, and I think that Kent Kennard is the man."

"I agree with you," said Major Buckner, and taking his leave of the wounded man and the captain, the ranchero mounted his horse, and

when I was here to-day, came a score of different trails, and that was about the number we stampeded last night."

"I hate to see you go alone."

"Oh, I'll take care of myself."

"Let me put on the other disguise you have and go with you."

"As you please, Bill; but I think the strategy would work better with one than two."

"I'm only afraid you'll get into an owl's nest on entering."

"I'll play Owl, you may be assured, and open those gates so that you can enter."

"I don't believe there are many men at the gate, doubtless only one on watch, and I'll manage him until you come up."

"True, you can do that, and the girl must be rescued, while I see no other chance of getting admission, and the boy said, you remember, that Kennard had some dozen men at his ranch."

"I don't mind the number with the boys we have here, if we can only get a foothold, and my plan is about the safest, I think."

"I can suggest no other, except to charge up to the stockade, scale it, open the gate and fight it out."

"It would cost too many of our little band, Bill."

"No; let me go as I suggest, alone, and I'll call out that I am Brandy Ben, whom I killed, and whose voice I heard just enough to imitate, and I'll shout a warning, too."

"They'll let me in, I'm sure, and the surprise I give whoever is there will give me a chance to open the gates for you."

"Now I'll make my toilet and be off."

Ten minutes after, rigged out in his Owl's head-dress, White Beaver mounted the horse of the slain Brandy Ben and rode away across the prairie.

He made quite a long circuit, for fear some one might be watching him with a glass from the stockade, and then approached the ranch from another direction.

Arriving within a quarter of a mile from the gate, he suddenly saw coming toward him at a run his scout comrades.

They were riding as though to try and head him off.

He gave a pretended shout of alarm, and dashed for the stockade at the full speed of his horse.

It looked like an exciting chase, with the chances in favor of the pursued, and gaining on the others, as he intended to do, White Beaver started up the slope for the gateway, calling out, in a voice well feigned to resemble the tones of the man he had slain:

"Open the gate! ho there, pard!"

Almost instantly came back the cry:

"Who are you?"

"Brandy Ben!"

"Ay, ay, I see you now, Ben! all right!" was the reply, and the gate was at once thrown wide open.

Into it, at full speed dashed White Beaver, and quickly the gate closed behind him, while the man shouted:

"Come, Ben, sound the tocsin, while I open fire on those devils, or they'll be over the stockade before we can check them."

White Beaver saw the man spring to a rack, in which were visible half a dozen rifles of all sizes and calibers, for a lantern hung in the little shanty at one side of the gateway.

What the tocsin was, or where it was, the scout did not know, or care; but, quick as a flash he threw himself from his saddle, and, as the man threw the muzzle of his rifle into a small port-hole, to fire upon the coming scouts, he seized him in his powerful grasp, and hurled him to the floor with a force that nearly stunned him, while he said sternly:

"One word, sir, or one act of resistance, and you die!"

"Hold, Ben, what's up that you behave so?"

"This hain't square, and the cap'n'll hang you for it," whined the prostrate man, at the same time trying to slip his hand upon the butt of a revolver in his belt.

But springing forward White Beaver put his foot upon the arm with a force that nearly snapped the bone, and cried sternly:

"I shall have to kill you, my man, for I am not your friend, Brandy Ben."

"Now obey me, or I'll keep my word."

The man was cowed now, for he was half-dazed with surprise, and he said:

"I cries give up, pard."

"See that you act it as well," and White Beaver took from him his revolver and knife.

Then he ordered him to rise, and marched him to the side of his horse, when he took the lariat from the saddle-horn and quickly bound him, with a skill that evinced practice in just that kind of work.

Just as he finished his task, the hoofs of the scouts' horses were heard almost up to the stockade, and throwing down the inner bars, White Beaver opened the gates and stepped without, his prisoner held firmly in his grasp.

"Ho, pards! go slow!" he called out, raising his hand in warning.

Instantly all drew rein with a suddenness that showed long practice.

"Pards, I've got the gate, and have here the guard; but I do not know what more we will have to face, so come in softly and we'll hold a council of war, and find out what this fellow knows."

"I don't know nothing," was the sullen reply of the prisoner, whom White Beaver recognized as the same man whom he had seen at the gate on duty that morning.

"That remains to be seen, pard," said Wild Bill, and he stepped up to the side of the prisoner and placed his pistol-muzzle hard against his side.

CHAPTER XX.

A MYSTERY UNSOLVED.

THE guard at the stockade gate of Kennard's ranch was certainly in a tight place, with the Dead Shots about him.

He had not expected danger, and was therefore wholly taken by surprise when so cleverly captured by White Beaver.

Added to this, the other scouts coming up were enough to awe him.

But he nerved himself to what was before him, and when Wild Bill placed his revolver against his heart, he did not move or flinch.

"Now, my man, you are dealing with those who can be merciful, if there is need of their being so, and who can be merciless with cause, so I wish your answers to be governed accordingly, for your fate depends upon yourself," sternly said Wild Bill.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" boldly asked the guard.

"We are prairiemen, on a laudable hunt, and we intend to carry out our good intentions."

"As for a name, those who know us best call us Dead Shots."

"And who is that traitor?" and the man pointed to White Beaver, who still wore his mask of the Red Owl.

"Ah! you spoke without thinking, my friend, for you give it away that he, wearing the mask of a Red Owl, is a traitor to bring us here."

"So you, too, belong to the band which you accuse him of being a traitor to?"

The man felt that he had betrayed himself, and muttered an oath; but he answered quickly:

"A compact exists among the Red Owls not to harm this ranch, as its owner once saved the life of their captain, and that man, to lead you here, for whatever purpose you may have come, certainly turns traitor against the wishes of his chief."

"Ah! well said, and cleverly turned, pard; but it won't serve you."

"Now answer me: is not this ranch the retreat of the Red Owls?"

"It is not."

"What is it?"

"The prairie home of Captain Kent Kennard, a ranchero, and leader of the Kansas Vigilantes."

"A captain of what is supposed to be a law-abiding, crime-punishing band of Vigilantes, and yet suspected of being a leader of the Red Owl Rangers, the worst set of cut-throats that ever disgraced the border."

"He may be accused, but that don't make him so, and his actions are too open for him to be thought so by those who know him."

"That remains to be seen; but tell me, where is he?"

"In Prairie City."

"And his men?"

"The Vigilantes?"

"No."

"The cattlemen of this ranch?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"The Red Owls."

"They are not his men, but they passed here at early dawn this morning, going northward."

"You will find their trails around the north end of the stockade, and from there I do not know where they lead."

"They did not halt?"

"No."

"Broncho Billy, you and Bravo Buck take a look at those trails, but don't be gone but a few minutes."

The two scouts started off on foot, and Wild Bill continued:

"Where is your master's company of Vigilantes?"

"I have no master."

"Your chief, then?"

"In Prairie City."

"Ah! they dwell there?"

"Yes."

"And his cattlemen, or cowboys?"

"They drove the cattle to another grazing-ground to-day, down the creek some miles."

"How many cowboys has he?"

"About ten?"

"Many cattle?"

"Pretty considerable."

"And who are here at the ranch?"

"About half a dozen, including the servants."

"Do you expect your master home soon?"

"He may come at any moment, and perhaps not for days."

"Where is his captive?"

"I don't understand you."

"Where is the lady who entered this stockade a while since?"

The man was silent and seemed a trifle nervous.

"Did you hear me?"

"Did you see it too?" he asked, in a hushed tone.

"See what?"

"It."

"What it, man?"

"The Ghost," he said, in a whisper.

"My man, don't take us for idiots, for we don't believe in ghosts."

"Nor did I until I saw it," was the answer, and the man's whole manner changed to one of nervous dread.

"Look here, sir," sternly said Wild Bill.

"Don't attempt to play us for fools, but tell me where the lady is that rode into this stockade an hour ago?"

"God only knows, pard, for I don't."

"Do you mean to say that no lady entered here?"

"I mean to say that a ghost did."

"You opened the gate for her?"

"I always do! but it's a spirit."

Wild Bill uttered an impatient imprecation and turned to White Beaver, and asked in a whisper:

"What is he giving us, Beaver?"

"I am watching to see if he believes what he says, or is trying to deceive us."

"And what do you think, Doc?"

"Question him more and I will tell you," answered the Surgeon Scout.

"You have the face to tell me that the woman on horseback, whom that gentleman chased across the prairies, and saw dash into this gate, is a ghost?"

"Yes, pard."

"And you believe it?"

"I do."

Just then Broncho Billy and Bravo Buck returned, and reported that the trails, some twenty, in number of horses, approached near to the gate, then turned off around the stockade to the north, going on up the creek bank in one solid trail.

"So far your story holds good, my man, regarding the trail of the Red Owls; but, Billy, do they approach the stockade here in one trail?"

"No, they come from different ways, just as we saw them scatter and meet near the gate and then form one trail, as though united, by all meeting here, if not together, going in a given direction alone, as to a rendezvous," answered Broncho Billy.

"Now, my man, we will return to the ghost."

"Well."

"Who is it?"

"If you remember a young lady who was murdered some years ago in this part of the country?"

"No, I do not know it, but it appears to me that I recall something of the kind."

"I do," said Frank North. "She came out to these parts with a train, looking for her husband, and used to stop in Prairie City, if I remember aright, and rode out every day trying to find the man she was in search of."

"Some say she would be gone for days, and then turn up when they thought she was dead."

"She had money, and kept the best horses, and one day was found murdered."

"I remember that Buffalo Bill told me about it, for he knows her, and said her murderer had never been found."

"Is this the story as you know it, my man?" and Wild Bill turned again to the ranchman.

"Well, with a little difference."

"What difference?"

"You want to know all I can tell you, pard?"

"Yes."

"About the Prairie Specter, for that's what they call her hereabouts."

"Yes."

"I don't like to talk about her, for she has scared me heaps of times; but I don't like that revolver of yours against me, and I suppose I must get talkative."

"It will be more healthy for you if you are, so out with your story, and be lively, for we have no time to lose, especially if we have to kill and bury you."

The man started at this, although he seemed all along to realize his danger, and then began his story of the Prairie Specter.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PRAIRIE SPECTER.

"You see, pard," began the man, "I know the story as I heard it, and I can't vouch for what I don't see."

"Can you for what you see?" asked Wild Bill.

"Sometimes," was the laconic response.

"Well, to the story."

"I don't like to talk about the poor woman, for I have had enough frights from her."

"But they say she was murdered one moonlight night by some one up the creek a way, and a train coming down that way found her, and the men and women buried her, for it was an emigrant train."

"They reported in Prairie City what they had found and done, and some parties from there went out to see the grave, and be sure that no wolves should drag up the body, for everybody liked her, she was so young and beautiful."

"But when they got there it looked as though the grave had been disturbed, and digging down they found, not the lady, but the body of a man."

"He had been shot in the head, right in the center between the eyes, where the lady had been shot, and he was rolled up in his blanket, as she had been in hers."

"This was a surprise-party, pards, to all in Prairie City; but there was over a hundred folks in that train, men, women and children, and they all swore the same way about burying the woman there, described her, and there was no doubt."

"But the woman did not turn up, and the affair became a mystery in these parts."

"Now and then hunters came in telling how they had seen the same pretty woman—Lady Lucy they called her, for her name on the books of the Overland Palace was written Mistress Lucille Lester, but the boys got it L-u-c-y, for they get everything wrong in these parts."

"Then she was not dead?"

"Oh, yes, pard."

"Then how could the hunters have seen her?"

"They saw her ghost."

"Nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense, pard, for folks soon passed her, sitting on her horse, right across her grave, and when some brave fellows, as didn't believe in ghosts, tried to catch her, she laughed a mad kind of laughter, and ran right away from them."

"Now Captain Kent Kennard has about the fastest four-footed beast in these parts, and one that can go a long way in a full run, but he couldn't catch her, and one night he was hardly enough to shoot at her horse, emptying his whole rifle, for he's a devil when roused, and yet it did no good, for she laughed and ran away just the same."

"Was she seen afterward?"

"Man! didn't you see her to-night, and hain't I seen her a dozen or more times?"

"Yes, thirteen times to-night, and it's the thirteenth time that has brought me bad luck."

"Bah! you are as big a fool as the rest of the ghost-seers."

"Pard, I tell you that that woman hain't real; she's a spirit."

"She has come across the prairie here some nights, and I always opens the gate for her."

"The first time I saw her I was smoking my pipe when she rode up, and I let her in, thinking she was a lady friend of the cap'n's."

"She pointed to the gate with her whip, and I opened it, at the same time wishing her a good-evening."

"Lord! she looked at me and made no reply, but I remembered her big staring eyes."

"Well, I went over to breakfast in the morning, and asked who she was, saying a fine-looking lady like her might be civil."

"But they told me no lady had come in, and I got scared, for no one had seen her, and I had not let her out of the gate again, nor had she passed out, for the key of the padlock that locks the bar was in my pocket."

"Soon after she came again, and I told her she could not come in."

"Then her eyes blazed at me, and she pointed at the gate."

"I was scared, I can tell you, and I dodged back through the little shutter and opened the gate, for I had no power to do otherwise."

"Since then I always let her in, but how she gets out Heaven only knows."

"We will see if she has gotten out to-night," said Wild Bill, dryly.

"Well, pard, you'll see."

"Is there another gate?"

"Only a small one for humans, over on the creek, for no horse could go through it."

"Now tell me if you know Miss Belle Bradford?"

"I've seen her, pard, for she's been here with her uncle, to see Cap'n Kent."

"And when was she here last?"

"Some months ago, with her uncle and little boy cousin."

"She has been here since."

"I hain't seen her."

"Who else guards this gate?"

"No one."

"You alone attend to it?"

"Yes, pard, excepting when I go to my meals up at the ranch, and then one of the boys takes my place until I come back."

"And you say that Miss Bradford has not come in here since a month back?"

"No."

"When was your master here last?"

"Three days ago."

"And he was not here early last night, with Miss Bradford?"

"No."

Wild Bill turned to his comrades, for the man seemed honest.

"What do you say, Beaver?" he asked.

"Leave him a prisoner here, with Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick to guard him, and hold

the gate, while the rest of us search the ranch; but first let us find out just where the small gate is, that he speaks of, and we can send a man there to guard it, for our presence here does not seem to be known to any one else in the inclosure."

"A good plan, Beaver."

"You, Dandy, remain here with Dashing Dan; and Buck, you go to the little gate, for this man will tell you how to reach it, if he values his life."

"I'll tell you, pard, for this is a square ranch, and I've nothing to hide, while you seem to be acting with authority."

"But I would like to know which of the Red Owls that man is, for I know most of 'em, and it's not Brandy Ben, as he's always half drunk and has the flavor of a bar-room about him."

"Never mind which one he is; but he is one to soon let us know if you tell the truth."

"Now tell us how to find the little gate."

"Better follow the stockade wall around until you come to a group of trees, growing against it, and there is the gate."

"All right; now go, Buck."

"Mounted, Bill?"

"Can we ride there?"

"Yes."

"Go on horseback, then," and Buck started off.

"Now tell us how to get to the ranch cabins?"

"Why don't you ask your traitor Red Owl there, for many of 'em used to be cowboys here, before they took to the road-agency biz, and he should know."

"We prefer to rely upon you, and your life hangs by what you tell us true or false."

"All right, pard; I suppose I'm in for it, and it might be a sheep as well as a lamb."

"This trail leads right to the cap'n's cabin."

"Come, pards, we will be off, and five of us will go a little in advance on foot, you following, Beaver, with our horses, for, if there's to be hot work, we will need your aid as a surgeon."

So saying, Wild Bill moved off on foot accompanied by Night Hawk George, Broncho Billy, Frank North and Texas Jack, while White Beaver soon after followed with the horses, riding his own, and leading the other five.

At the gate remained Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick, with their horses, and the prisoner securely bound, while Bravo Buck had gone to hold the little gate on the creek side of the stockade.

With this arrangement, Wild Bill hoped to take and hold the ranch against any odds that might be there, in spite of what the guard had said, and all went prepared to face any peril that might come upon them, and the confidence they held in themselves had been gained after a long ordeal of deadly dangers in their wild life upon the far frontier.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STARTLING DISAPPEARANCE.

At the time Wild Bill and his comrades entered the Kennard ranch, they did not doubt but that they would find the maiden a prisoner there.

The story of the gate-guard they thought had been told them to give them a scare regarding the specter rider, though some of them had heard the weird story before.

Failing to have this effect, they had an idea that they would have to fight to get Belle Bradford out of the clutches of Kennard's followers, for that the woman on horseback, whom White Beaver had chased to the ranch, was other than the kidnapped maiden they had not the remotest idea.

They feared, by her returning to the ranch, that she had either gone mad, or having made some arrangement for her liberty, had met them on her way home, and fearing them, had returned to her captor rather than to them, it being surmised of course that she did not know them as they were.

Across the grounds then to the cabins went the six men, stretched out in a long line, their rifles ready, and themselves nerved for whatever might be before them.

Through the scattering trees, up to the first cabin, which was evidently a servants' quarter.

A light burned dimly within, and a knock at the door brought a reply:

"What is it?"

"The cap'n's come, pard, and wants yer," said Wild Bill.

"All right; is that you, Jake?" asked the voice.

"Yes, hurry up."

A moment after a man stepped out of the door, and a revolver confronted his vision, while strong hands grasped him upon either side.

"Whew! What are up?" he cried, in alarm.

"Who are you?" sternly demanded Wild Bill.

"Bouncer, are ther name is hitched to me here," said the man, taking his capture with strange coolness.

He was possessed of a herculean frame, had a red head, beard the same hue, and small, cunning gray eyes.

He was dressed as a cowboy, and had on his belt of arms.

"Well, Mr. Bouncer, we have paid a visit to this ranch to look for a young lady, whom we

know to be here, so if you aid us in our search all will be well with you; but if you give us trouble, you might as well spend your time from this minute in prayer."

"I don't know nothin' about no gal."

"Remember, no lies, if you value your life."

"Fact, pard! I doesn't know of no gal bein' here."

"Do you know Miss Belle Bradford?"

"Has seen her often."

"Was she not brought here day before yesterday evening?"

"Guess not, for I'd have known it; but ther' man at ther' gate, Foxy, kin tell yer."

"When did you go to bed?"

"An hour ago."

"And you saw no lady on horseback ride into the ranch?"

"Pard, has ther' been a gal on horseback seen here?" and he spoke in a whisper.

"Yes."

"Then it were Lady Lucy's ghost."

"Don't give us any of that spirit talk, or I'll make a ghost of you."

"Who was the lady?"

"I tell yer it were ther Pararer Specter, pard."

"What do you do in this ranch?"

"Has an eye to bossin' it for ther cap'n."

"Where is he?"

"Like as not in Pararer City, gamblin' at ther Overland, fer he do love keards."

"How many more of you are there here?"

"Waal, he has a Chineese cook and servant, then thar's a Injun and his squaw, Chief Sal, and Squaw Sallie, we calls 'em, and they is Tonkaways from Texas, and friends o' ther cap'n."

"Who else?"

"Thar is ten cattlemen, but they is down ther creek at ther lower ranch with ther stock."

"No one else?"

"Nary."

"Your captain, two Chinamen, two Indians, ten cowboys and Foxy?"

"And me, Bouncer, fer I is somebody, as ye'd hev diskivered if yer hadn't caught me asleep."

"Yes, and you, making seventeen in all."

"Yas, pard."

"And how many Red Owls has he?"

"I don't catch on, pard."

"How many Red Owls has your captain under him?"

"Pard, he commands ther Vigilantes, ther Ranger Regulators, and don't go for outlaw work."

"Why do the Red Owls not attack his ranch then?"

"Waal, thar is them among 'em who would like ter, I don't deny; but then ther cap'n once, in some way, helped their chief out of a life scrape, an' so he won't hear ter this ranch bein' tackled."

"To hear you talk one would think only saints dwelt in the Kennard ranch, but now I intend to see if you have told the truth, so lead us to the Indians' camp."

"I'll do it," and the man led the way to a couple of skin tepees further on in the timber.

A camp-fire was burning low in front of one of the tepees, and at the sound of their steps a head was thrust out of the other.

"Tonkaway!" called out the man.

"Ugh!" came from within.

"Come out, fer yer is wanted, as thar is wisiters here."

"Bring ther old lady, too, and tell her she needn't take time ter curl her front teeth and lace up her dancin'-boots, fer they is impatient varmints, and might git one'sy with ther waitin'."

Out of the tepee stepped a tall Indian, with a clean-cut, bold face, and following him was a squaw.

"They does ther huntin' fer ther ranch," explained Bouncer.

"All right; I want them to come with us."

"Now the Chineese," said Wild Bill.

"Yer'll skeer them China gents ter death, pard."

"Lead the way to them."

"I'll do it, for I'm a obligin' cuss when I can't help bein'."

And Bouncer started off once more, followed by the others, the Indians taking the situation most stoically.

Back of the main cabin, which was large and comfortable, was a smaller shanty, and here the cowboy stopped.

"They has some outlandish names o' the'r own, pard, but we calls 'em by Christian cognomens—thet's a good word, hain't it?"

And the cowboy smiled blandly.

"Well, call them what you please, but make them show up."

"Hello, Salt and Pepper—thet's what we baptized 'em one day in ther book, pard."

No answer came from within the shanty, and Bouncer continued:

"Say, Salt and Pepper, yer hed better step out and git acquainted with some friends o' mine as is anxious ter know yer."

"Come out, or some o' 'em mayn't believe you is in thar and send a bullet a-huntin' fer yer."

The small door swung open and the two Celestials appeared.

The moonlight pierced the foliage and fell full upon them, showing that they were very much alarmed at what they beheld.

"Are there others in the shanty?" asked Wild Bill.

"Nary more," replied Bouncer.

"I want you with us."

And Broncho Billy took charge of the two Chinamen.

"Now, who is in the cabin?"

"Not a soul."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, pard."

"We will see."

And Wild Bill, leaving Broncho Billy to guard Bouncer, the Indians and Chinese, with the rest of his comrades went to the cabin.

"Hold on, pard, don't bust in ther door, for I hes ther key, and yer'll find a lamp handy on a table as yer goes in."

And Bouncer handed over a key to Wild Bill.

"White Beaver, you go in with me, while you, North, with Night Hawk and Jack, watch outside."

And Wild Bill and the Surgeon Scout opened the door and entered.

They found themselves in a large hallway, and a lamp was found and lighted.

At the rear end was a large fire-place, on one side of which was a door and a cupboard upon the other.

A table was near, and the place seemed a kind of dining-room and kitchen.

On the right a door led into a large room filled with all kinds of things pertaining to frontier life, weapons of various kinds, saddles, bridles, lariats, serapes, furs, clothing and many other articles.

On the left were two good-sized rooms, both bedrooms, and strangely well furnished for that wild land.

The front one of them, it could be seen, was the living room of the master of the ranch, and it was just as he had left it. There were a number of books on shelves, a guitar, a piano, a banjo, easy-chairs, a luxurious lounge, curtains to the window, a large fire-place, and innumerable little things to make the room attractive to the dweller therein.

The back room, opening into the hall, seemed to be reserved as a guests' chamber and was very comfortable.

Rude steps led up from the hall, through a trap to a garret, and wild Bill went up on a voyage of discovery, but found nothing to reward him.

Descending, he went with the others, upon a thorough search of the entire ranch, within the inclosure, and came to the gate where Bravo Buck had been sent.

But he was not there.

Then began a search for him, but without result, and, to add to their amazement, the scouts soon discovered that Dashing Dan, Dandy Dick and their prisoner, Foxy, had disappeared.

Then a careful search was made of the whole ranch by the scouts, the prisoners being carried with them; but not a sign of the lady rider, or their missing comrades and Foxy, could be found.

In some mysterious way *all had disappeared.*

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HOLDING THE FORT."

"PARDS, what are we to make out of this mysterious disappearance?"

The one who asked the question was Wild Bill, and he did so after the ranch had been thoroughly searched for the third time, by moonlight, and with the use of lanterns.

For once the brave scout was nonplused, and his comrades were in very much the same frame of mind.

It was no wonder, either, when they had pursued the horsewoman into the ranch, and then been very coolly informed that she was a specter.

They had not found her there, nor had they found matters different from what Foxy had represented them, after they had gotten into the ranch.

But they had been unable to find any trace of their comrades, who had so mysteriously disappeared from their posts of duty.

"I shall hold the fort, boys, and camp here," said Wild Bill, and so Frank Powell took the large gate, Texas Jack went to the small one, the Indians and Bouncer were securely bound, the Chinese being left free, and Broncho Billy was placed on guard over the cabin in which they were confined, while Wild Bill, Frank North and Night Hawk George continued their investigations as well as they could by moonlight.

The horses even of the three scouts had disappeared, along with those of the two Red Owls, whom they had with them, so there was no solving the mystery, try as they might, for certainly their comrades were no men to desert them, nor were they the kind to surrender without resistance, and not a shot had been heard, nor a call from them for aid.

When at length the long night wore away, and daylight came, the search for trails was begun.

To the surprise of the scouts not a trail could be found to show how the horses of their comrades had disappeared, and the most thorough search of all was fruitless.

"Well, we will remain here and work from this point."

"If Kent Kennard comes then he will have to answer to me, for there is some trickery in all this which he is doubtless at the bottom of."

"I only hope that no harm has befallen our comrades and the girl; but we hold this ranch and here we'll remain until the mystery is cleared up."

"Now you, Broncho, I wish to go off on a little expedition for me, and I'll tell you just what it is, and if you push right through you ought to get back within thirty-six hours."

Broncho Billy expressed himself as ready for the work before him, be it what it might, and soon after he rode away from the ranch at a gallop.

That they might have as little trouble as possible with the prisoners they were handcuffed with some irons found in Kennard's cabin, and then chained in the shanty, which rendered them secure without a scout to watch them.

"I hate to chain up the squaw like a dog, but she's as vicious as a snake, and would set them all free mighty quick," said Wild Bill.

The Indian chief bore his captivity like a stoic, the squaw was sullen, and Bouncer was seemingly indifferent.

The two Chinese had been given a warning by Wild Bill, and then set to work to do the cooking and camp work, and they appeared as well satisfied at it as though their former master was there.

The five remaining scouts then began to go over every foot of ground within the stockade, keeping a look to the approach of any one from the prairie that might be coming, and prepared to meet any foe they might come upon.

But the search, as before, proved useless; but Wild Bill did not give up, and while Night Hawk George acted as guard, to keep a lookout upon the prairie, he, White Beaver, Frank North and Texas Jack began to explore the creek shore.

The bank here was high, and the stockade wall ran along the edge of it, though there was little danger to be apprehended from a foe in that direction.

The creek was deep, for there was a bend there, and the current cut in under the bank, flowing swiftly.

From the stockade wall, on which Wild Bill stood, down to the water was some forty feet of precipitous bank, and on the other shore was a wild growth, or thicket, with marsh and bogs.

Beyond was the prairie, and its approach could be guarded from the stockade wall.

The ranch, being on a hill, was thus well located for defense against foes that might be ten times the number of those within the inclosure.

The Chinese gave the scouts a most excellent breakfast; but they seemed in little humor to eat, as the loss of their comrades weighed upon them.

Failing in finding any trace of the missing ones, they could do nothing but wait for coming events to develop themselves into something more substantial than the mysteries of the past.

While at dinner a hail from Night Hawk, who was on duty at the prairie gate, carried them to that point at a run.

Glancing out over the prairie they saw a horseman coming.

He was evidently a cowboy, and came on toward the gate with the air of one who suspected no danger.

As he drew near he called out:

"Come, Foxy, open your old trap and let me come in."

In response the gate swung open, and into the stockade inclosure rode the cowboy.

He drew rein suddenly as he saw that he was covered by several rifles, and he called out:

"What's up, pards, and who is yer?"

"The ranch has changed masters for the while, pard, and you'll do well to understand at once that you are a prisoner," said Wild Bill.

"It don't take spectacles ter see thet fact, pard; but whar's ther cap'n?"

"You mean Kent Kennard?"

"Yas, for he's boss here."

"You are mistaken, for I am boss here now."

"It looks it; but whar is ther cap'n?"

"In Prairie City."

"I guess not, for he was at ther corral ranch three hours ago, and told me ter meet him here."

"Are you one of his men?"

"I are, and my name's down as Cowboy Kit."

"And you came here to meet Captain Kennard?"

"I did, for a truth?"

"How long ago did you see him?"

"Three hours."

"Where?"

"At ther corral ranch that is his, and whar we hev ther cattle."

"How many of you are there?"

"Thar's nine left thar."

"And you say Kennard came there and told you to meet him here?"

"That's it."

"Where did he go then?"

"He tuk a trail to ther north'ard."

"Was he alone?"

"He were."

"Well, sir, you must dismount and take your chances with your comrades, for I have several of your friends here."

"Whar's Foxy?"

"The gate guard?"

"Yas."

"He escaped."

"Ah! And Bouncer?"

"He is where you soon will be."

"Whar is thet?"

"In irons."

"Ther devil!"

"Yes; you shall be put where you cannot escape."

"And ther Injuns?"

"You'll find them there."

"And ther Chinee niggers?"

"They are prisoners, too, though not in irons."

"Wal, I gives in, for I are clean tuk back, and no mistake."

"Jack, take the gentleman over to the cabin with the others and iron him well, while we wait here to receive Captain Kennard with all honors," said Wild Bill.

And a close watch was at once set for the discovery of Kent Kennard's approach.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LEADER OF THE RED OWLS.

I MUST now return to little Brad Buckner, who it will be remembered went down under his horse upon the prairie after seeing the strange horsewoman who had fled from the scouts.

The boy was temporarily stunned by the fall, and when he came to, found his pony feeding near.

He was dazed for awhile, and only with an effort overcame the feeling upon him.

Then he mounted Fire-cracker and started homeward, feeling rather sore all over.

In the mean time his father had become alarmed at his long absence, and accompanied by a cowboy had set out in search of him.

Crossing the stream, they saw Brad approaching slowly across the prairie and soon came up with him.

In a few words he told his father of his adventures, and swore him to secrecy regarding the presence of Wild Bill and his comrades in that part of the country and who had determined to find Belle Bradford.

As the two were talking together the cowboy, who had ridden some distance away on the prairie, suddenly came back at a gallop with the report that quite a number of horsemen were coming down the stream trail.

Instantly their horses' noses were muzzled and they all lay down in a buffalo wallow that they might see who were the strangers.

The moon was very brilliant, and soon the horsemen came in sight.

Major Buckner had his glass with him, and from his place in the grass turned it upon the men.

"Great God!"

The exclamation came in startled words from his lips, and he handed the glass to Brad, who quickly said, as soon as he had leveled it:

"It's the Red Owls, pa."

"It is indeed; but who is it at their head?"

Again the boy looked, and then handed the glass to the cowboy, while he said:

"You say who it is, Burt."

"Why, it's Cap'n Kennard," was the surprised remark of the cowboy.

"Yes, it is Kennard, and he alone of all the band wears no mask."

"Now he cannot deny what I have seen with my own eyes," said the major.

"He denied what I saw with my eyes," Brad returned.

"I cannot now believe that you were mistaken, my son."

"Just to think, the captain of the Regulator Rangers none other than the leader of the Red Owls!"

"No wonder this country is in a fearful state."

"You will report him, father, to the Regulators?"

"Alas, my boy, I cannot, I dare not."

"Did I dare do so, would I not have forced trouble upon him last night at the Overland? But he holds a power that I cannot despise, and I can only wait and hope."

"And let this man go on as he is, when you know he is a Red Owl?" almost indignantly said the boy.

"It must be so, at least for the present, and I wish you, Brad, and you also, Burt, to say nothing of seeing Kent Kennard with the Red Owls, but leave all for me to settle."

"Certain, major, if you wishes it; but I'd like to put a bullet inter him," responded the cowboy.

"See, they are going on down the stream, and not crossing, as I feared they intended, to pay me a visit."

"Let me see, there are just twenty-one of them."

"Yes, father, and they all seem to be mounted on black horses, while how strange those

owl-heads look in the moonlight," Brad rejoined.

Pausing within a short distance of the three in hiding, the Red Owls held on down the stream and soon disappeared from sight.

"Where are they going, I wonder?" said Brad.

"I don't know, but they are bound upon some deviltry."

"Now, Brad, you go on home and get some rest, for you need it sadly, and Burt will go with me to the town, and also see if it was really Belle you saw on horseback."

Brad wanted to go too, and hunt for his cousin Belle, though he felt that he was not able to do so: but his father was firm, and he set out alone for the ranch, while Major Buckner and Burt rode on their way toward Prairie City.

It was quite a long ride that the two took, and proved a useless search, and it was verging on midnight when they rode up to the Overland Palace and dismounted.

Landlord Sands met them at the door and gave them a welcome, for he was always a genial host.

"Glad to see you, major; and you too, Burt."

"Any news of the young lady, sir?"

"No, Sands, nothing that is cheering; but is Captain Tayloe, of the army, here?"

"Yes, major, you will find him in the saloon playing cards with Kennard."

"What Kennard?"

"Cap'n Kent Kennard."

Major Buckner started, and asked quickly:

"Is Kent Kennard here?"

"Yes, sir."

"When did he come?"

"I really could not say, major, for he has his room here, the past few days, and comes and goes at will."

"I will go in and see Captain Tayloe," said the major, and he entered the gambling saloon, followed by Burt.

There truly sat Kent Kennard, a cigar between his teeth, calm, cynical and handsome, as he played cards with Captain Tayloe, the army officer.

"You are too heavy for me, Kennard, for I can afford to lose only so much and must withdraw," said the army officer, as Major Buckner drew near.

Discovering the visitors, the officer arose and greeted him pleasantly, while Major Buckner asked, as he did not return the nod of recognition which Kennard gave him:

"May I inquire, Captain Tayloe, if Captain Kennard has been long in this saloon to-night?"

"I can answer for myself, Buckner."

"I came here half an hour ago," was the terse reply.

"From a ride upon the prairies?"

"No, from my room in the hotel, where I have been sleeping most of the day."

"You have not been out on the prairies to-day?"

"I have not; but let me tell you, Major Buckner, that I am not one to submit to being questioned by any man."

"You may, Captain Kennard, have to submit soon to being questioned by the Regulators," was the angry retort of the major, and he looked at the one he addressed in a menacing way.

But Kent Kennard did not change color, in the slightest degree, while he returned with a sneer:

"If I am questioned by the Regulators, sir, from any reason they may deem fit, Major Buckner will not be among that august body, though he may also be called before them to answer certain questions, which I, as their captain, might ask."

Major Buckner colored and then turned pale, while Captain Tayloe said quickly:

"Gentlemen, I cannot see that an argument between you two will result in any good, so I beg you to desist, while you, Major Buckner, I would like to ask if you have any news of your niece?"

"No, sir, no more than that she was seen to-night upon the prairie, but fled at the call of the one who saw her."

"This is strange, indeed; but was she mounted?"

"Yes, sir."

"And alone?"

"Yes."

"It is indeed strange; but she may have feared the one she met, and have fled, being on her way home."

"No, sir, for she had had ample time to come home, and had not crossed the stream at the place where she should have forded it."

"But who saw her?"

"My son."

"That wise boy again," sneered Kent Kennard.

"Yes, sir, and he is as positive that he saw Belle, as I and Burt here are that we saw you out upon the prairie to-night," retorted the major, quickly.

"Then your sight, like the boy's, is off, for I was not on the prairie to-night."

"Cap'n Kennard, you is a lyin' hound ter say thet," yelled Burt, at the same time drawing his revolver and throwing it forward.

There were two flashes and reports, almost sounding as one, and then a heavy fall of a body.

"Your cowboy should have been quicker with his weapon if he intended giving me the lie, Buckner; but he meant well, for he has chipped a piece out of my shoulder."

"Perhaps you will see to his burial, as I have more important work to do," and Captain Kent Kennard left the saloon, while Major Buckner bent over the body of the cowboy.

"Poor Burt! he is dead, for the bullet pierced his brain," he said.

"Yes, Cap'n Kennard always hits dead center," responded one of the bystanders.

And giving to Sands, who just then came in, some money to have Burt decently buried, Major Buckner left the saloon accompanied by Captain Tayloe.

CHAPTER XXV.

ON THE SAME TRAIL.

"COME with me to my room, major," said Captain Tayloe, as the two left the saloon together after the tragic death of Burt, the cowboy.

In that wild place a man's death amounted to but a momentary excitement, and when it was explained that Burt had called Captain Kennard a liar, and then "drew on him," but "wasn't quick enough," no more questions were asked, though it was wondered, when Major Buckner was the cause, apparently, he had not taken up the cowboy's quarrel with the Regulator.

Upon going to the room of Captain Tayloe, Major Buckner found that it adjoined one that was occupied by the officer's wounded brother.

The two were pleasant quarters, and, with Sands for landlord, as far as the rooms were concerned, and the generously supplied table, the Overland Palace was by no means an unpleasant abiding-place; but, with the wild element about it, the danger of death, the drinking and carousing by night and by day, it was not a resort to seek for quietude.

"Be seated, major," said the army officer, politely, and Major Buckner dropped into a seat, considerably shaken up by the death of his favorite cowboy at the hands of the man against whom he dared not raise a finger.

"Captain Tayloe, what I say to you, sir, is in confidence, if you will so consider it," he began.

"Certainly, Major Buckner," and the officer got up and closed the door between the two rooms.

"Now, sir, what you say will not be overheard," he said, as he resumed his seat.

"What I would say, sir, is that my sister and her niece are from the South, and their kindred were in the Southern army."

"In their old home it was that they met Kent Kennard, at one time an officer, I believe, in the Confederate army, or at least he was so considered, and afterward a guerrilla."

"He had loved my niece then, and was refused by her, and when they came here to live with me, after the war, he also turned up in Kansas, to our great horror, for we fear the man greatly."

"He is a ranchero, has money, it seems, and is captain of the Regulator Vigilantes, or Rangers, though he is known to be one of the wildest, most desperate spirits on the border."

"Now, I am pained to say that he holds over myself and Belle and her mother a family secret of ours, and through this forced himself upon us in a friendly way, and more, forced us to consent that my niece should marry him, though he knows she is engaged to another, a young Texan Ranger and cattle-man on the Rio Grande, and whom she has known from her earliest girlhood."

"In consenting to marry Kennard, Belle did so from strategy, for she wrote to her lover, hoping he would come and in some way prevent it."

"I am now confident that this letter was intercepted by Kennard, for instead of waiting for the appointed time for his marriage, he met her upon the prairie, and, as you know, kidnapped her."

"So your boy said, my dear major; but, as I was witness to the fact that Kennard had not left the saloon that afternoon or evening, it certainly was not he."

"And yet, major, when I doubted my boy after all I had heard, I do not now, as I saw Kennard myself on the prairie to-night."

"And yet he says he was not away from the hotel."

"So he says; but I saw him, and more, so did Brad, my son, and that poor boy you heard call him a liar and lose his life for it."

"Where was he?"

"A long way from Prairie City, following a trail that runs along the bank of the stream near my ranch."

"He rode at the head of twenty men who were none other than the Red Owl Rangers."

"Ha! can this be true?"

"It certainly is, for I saw what I assert, as did Burt and my son."

"I sent Brad to the ranch, and the cowboy and myself went to look up the woman on horseback, whom Brad said was his cousin Belle."

"And you could not find her?"

"No, sir."

"And then?"

"We came here, and both of us were taken utterly by surprise to find Kent Kennard playing cards with you."

"Major, I am not a gambler, sir, though fond of cards, and I played with that man to-night to study him, for he interests me deeply."

"He won from me, as he does from every one, and I was glad to get out of the game."

"He did not win from that splendid scout, Wild Bill."

"No; and I could not account for it."

"I did."

"How?"

"Wild Bill gave him warning that he would kill him if he cheated, and kept his eyes upon Kennard's hands, so that he had to play square."

"Ah! that may be; but what an adept at cheating he must be, as he is never caught, and always wins."

"Yes, Kent Kennard is a remarkable man."

"And so is Wild Bill."

"Ah! there you refer to one who is a wonder, from all that I have heard of him, and I hope to see more of him."

"I believe you will, sir, for I will tell you that he is now on the search for my niece."

"I am glad to hear this, for he will find her if man can do it; but what you tell me about seeing Kennard on the prairie to-night astounds me."

"Can he have a double?"

"It would be impossible to find his double in deviltry."

"That may be, and in looks, too, for he is a wonderfully handsome man."

"Yes, he is a magnificent devil; but, major, I wish to ask you, as you are here, to try and keep your eyes on the movements of Kent Kennard, and let me know when he is here, and when away?"

"I will gladly do so, major."

"The fact is, I have a brother who has been a pretty wild fellow, and he got wounded in a scrape, sent to the fort for me, and I am here to nurse him."

"Now Andy is improving, and he may be able to tell us something about Kennard."

"Come, and I will introduce him."

He led the major into the other room, and upon the bed lay a white-faced but handsome young man.

"Andy, this is Major Buckner, formerly of the army, and now a ranchero," said the captain.

"I have met Major Buckner before, and he will remember me when I tell him I am known here as Mexico."

"Ah, yes, you once saved my niece and myself from capture by a roving band of Indians, and we have always felt most kindly toward you, Mr. Tayloe."

"I wanted to accept your kind invitation, sir, to visit you, for you were good enough to say that you recognized me as a gentleman; but the fact is, I have an enemy by the name of Rum that has made a pretty hard case of me, and I would not go to where Miss Bradford was."

"My brother has not been a saint, major, for he was once an officer in the army, but got dismissed through dissipation, and went to Mexico, and then came here."

"That is why they dubbed him Mexico, and also, as he always wears the Mexican costume; but he intends to be a different man now."

"I hope so, and as soon as he is able to get out, I hope he will come to the ranch, for he can recuperate there more rapidly, and as I need a head ranchero, poor Burt being dead, the position is open to you, Mr. Tayloe, for I believe you have been a cowboy."

"Cowboy, teamster, hunter, guide, scout, soldier—in fact almost anything and everything, Major Buckner; but I accept with pleasure, and with thanks, the offer you make me, and will be ready for work in a week or so."

"Don't be in too great a hurry, for it was a bad wound you received."

"The man who gave it got a worse," was the reply of the reckless young borderman, who had killed his enemy after he had received the wound that had so nearly cost him his life.

"Now, Andy, tell us if you know Kent Kennard?"

"I do."

"Do you know if there is another man on the border that resembles him?"

"No, nor anywhere else, Arthur, I should swear, for he's not a man to match easy."

"What would you think if I would say he was captain of the Red Owls?"

"It would be just like him, in my humble opinion."

"Well, I wanted the major to hear what you had to say about him, and also to know if you thought it possible that he had a double on the prairies."

"The Lord made but one devil, Arthur, and I think that Kent Kennard is the man."

"I agree with you," said Major Buckner, and taking his leave of the wounded man and the captain, the ranchero mounted his horse, and

letting the animal of the dead cowboy have his rein to follow, started homeward.

As he rode out of town, upon the main prairie trail, he heard the fall of hoofs behind him, and turning quickly beheld Kent Kennard, mounted upon his splendid black horse.

"Ah, Major Buckner, we take the same trail, it seems," said Kent Kennard, with a cynical smile, as he rode along by the side of the major, who answered grimly:

"You and I, Kent Kennard, cannot long follow the same trail through life."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE TWO RANCREROS.

WHEN Major Buckner saw that he was to have as his companion none other than the man whom he looked upon as his worst enemy his heart sunk within him.

He was almost tempted to draw his pistol secretly and kill him; but his nature revolted at such an act, while the death of the man might in the end prove worse for him.

"My trail lies homeward, Captain Kennard, to the home that you have made desolate by robbing it of our poor Belle," said the major, sternly.

"You are mistaken, sir, for I have not made your home desolate; but I go this way for a mile or so, and we will ride together, especially as I have something to say to you."

"You have already said too much, sir, and I would to God we were rid of you!"

"Major Buckner, don't work yourself into a passion, for it will do you no good."

"In fact, should you even get so furious as to suddenly take me unawares, and kill me, I assure you, sir, that the secret I hold is in other hands, and my death would but precipitate upon you what you wish to avoid, so quit toying with your revolver and listen to me."

"What have you to say?" and Major Buckner took his hand off of his revolver, for involuntarily he had placed it there.

"You accuse me, sir, of making your home desolate by robbing you of your niece, while I tell you, Major Buckner, that you have hurt me by keeping from me the woman I have loved for years, and intended making my wife, even if I had to sin to do so."

"In heaven's name, Kennard, what do you mean?" cried the surprised major.

"I mean, sir, that I was honest in my love for your niece."

"I am well off, I have built me up a pleasant ranch, fully the equal of your own, while I have double as many cattle, and I hoped that Belle would be my wife."

"As she opposed me, and all of you, and I could not give her up, I used a weapon I had in a secret I hold, and forced you, her mother and herself to consent."

"The day was appointed and all seemed going well, when suddenly she disappears and you with your boy come to Prairie City and accuse me of being the abductor of Miss Bradford."

"And you are."

"It is a lie, Buckner, for I did nothing of the kind."

"I am wild, dissipated, a gambler, was dismissed from the Confederate army for irregularities, and seeing how the war would end, dyed my gray uniform blue, as it were, and got the name of guerrilla from both sides."

"But I tell you, Major Richard Buckner, your boy lied, as you did, when you said I carried off Belle Bradford."

"I firmly believe that you, and no one else, are her kidnapper."

"And I believe as firmly that you had her taken away and hidden from me, and, to prevent my discovering your treachery, you accuse me of stealing her."

"It is infamously false, this charge against me."

"I believe it."

"And let me tell you now, Kent Kennard, that I saw you a few hours ago at the head of a band of Red Owls."

The accused laughed, and Major Buckner continued:

"My son, that poor fellow Burt, whom you killed to-night, and I lay in a buffalo wallow and saw you pass not two hundred feet away from us."

"You rode at the head of the line, the moon shone brightly in your face, and I have, as you see, my glass, which showed you to us most distinctly."

"And yet you deny that we saw you."

"I do, most emphatically."

"As you deny kidnapping my niece?"

"Yes; I am not guilty of either charge."

"You are, and I hope to prove it."

"How will you?"

"In some way that you will least suspect."

"You will prove that I am captain of the Red Owls?"

"Yes."

"And that I kidnapped your niece?"

"I will."

"Do so whenever you can."

"And woe be unto you when I do, Kent Kennard."

"I do not heed threats, Major Buckner."

"You do when Wild Bill makes them."

"Ha!"

And the man started, adding quickly:

"What do you know of that man?"

"That you fear him, Kent Kennard."

"I fear no man," was the reply.

"You are afraid of Wild Bill, for you showed it last night."

Kent Kennard laughed, in that same mocking way, and asked:

"Where is this Wild Bill?"

"I do not know."

"Have you seen him since you left him in the Overland saloon?"

"I have not."

"Well, some day he and I will meet, and then the triumph will be mine."

"Not unless you shoot him in the back, like the cowardly assassin you are."

"Have a care, old man, for you can go too far; but a truce to this, and tell me who it was that said they saw Miss Bradford on the prairie to-night?"

"Her cousin."

"That boy again?"

"Yes, my son."

"He was alone?"

"Yes."

"Where did he see her?"

"Miles from here, at the spot where she was when you kidnapped her."

"And he spoke to her?"

"Yes, and called to her, but she rode away rapidly from him."

"He called her by name?"

"Certainly, and she could not mistake Brad's voice."

"And she escaped him?"

"Yes, his horse fell and hurt him, and he lost her."

"How was she mounted?"

"On Rocket, the horse she rode when you took her."

"I had hoped that she had escaped from you; but I cannot understand it, for she would certainly have returned home had she not gone mad, poor child, for Brad said that she laughed wildly."

"Major Buckner, the one whom your son saw was not Miss Bradford."

"He knows his cousin, and was quite near her, so recognized her in the moonlight."

"No."

"Who then was it?"

"The Lady Lucy."

"Nonsense! do you expect me to believe that weird story of a specter horsewoman that superstitious bordermen prate about?"

"Well, you know, if it was Belle, all about where she is, and I will just give you a few words to remember ere we part, for I take the trail to the right when we reach yonder rise," and Kennard pointed to a spot some hundred yards ahead.

"Well, sir?"

"I tell you again that I believe you to have hidden your niece from me, and that you accuse me to cover up your own tracks."

"But, I make no idle threat when I say that if Belle Bradford is not at your ranch within ten days, I will no longer keep the secret I hold, but send to the fort and report it to the officers commanding there."

"Good-night, Major Buckner," and urging his horse into a canter Kent Kennard turned off on another trail, while Major Buckner rode on his way homeward, muttering:

"After all can Brad have been mistaken, for, if he knew where poor Belle is, if he did kidnap her, would he make such a threat to me?"

"Oh! that this terrible mystery could be solved!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE OWLS' NEST.

UPON the banks of a Kansas river, not very far from the border line of the Indian Territory, a number of horsemen were encamped, one evening, two days after the parting of Major Buckner and Kent Kennard upon the prairie, when the trails of the two branched off in different directions.

The scene was a secluded one, right in the midst of thick timber that bordered the river-banks, and on a meadow that was surrounded by a ridge of hills.

At the base of the hills were a number of camp-fires, just lighted to cook the evening meal, and upon the meadow were over a hundred horses, staked out to feed upon the rich grass of the bottom-land.

Along the hillside were saddles, bridles, packs of various kinds, and half a score of wicky-ups, or brush shelters for the men.

The men numbered about thirty, and a hard-looking lot they were.

They were dressed in buckskin, even to moccasins, and wore slouch hats, but disguises of various kinds were attached to their saddles, and hanging convenient to hand, to their belt, was a red feather mask, proving that they belonged to the Red Owl Rangers.

Armed most thoroughly, wild, desperate men, of various nationalities, for there were among them Americans, Mexicans, Indians, a couple of negroes and a Chinese, they were as hard a set

of cut-throats as ever stole a horse or robbed a stage-coach.

Upon the bank, a ridge overlooking the meadow, a man was pacing to and fro in the timber, keeping an eye out upon the prairie against surprise.

Suddenly he stopped in his monotonous walk and looked attentively at something that had attracted his gaze.

"It's a horseman, sart'in," he said, and he raised a field-glass to his eyes.

"It's ther cap'n," he added.

Then he walked over to a point that looked down upon the meadow and called out:

"Ho, pard! ther cap'n are coming, so look out, fer he's in a hurry!"

There was instantly a sensation in camp, saddles and bridles were hung up, pack-saddles were laid away in a group by themselves, and a general appearance of order, which had not before been visible, was now observed upon all sides.

It seemed to be a proof that, whoever the captain of the band was, he was a good disciplinarian, if he was a bad man.

Returning to his post, the guard stood like a sentinel on duty, awaiting the coming of the horseman.

At a swift lope he came forward, riding a large black stallion that seemed not to know what fatigue was.

He was following a well-traveled trail that came out at the point where the guard stood, and the latter, as the horseman drew near, put on the Red Owl mask to receive him.

The appearance of the horseman was striking, for he was dressed in the Mexican garb, picturesque and beautiful, and his saddle fairly glittered with the silver upon it.

A glance at the face of this captain of the Red Owl Rangers, and at once the reader would find it strangely familiar, for dark, cynical, handsome and stern, it was the face of Kent Kennard.

The guard touched his hat politely, as the chief rode up, and returning the salute, he asked:

"Well, Dent, what news at the camp?"

"The boys is all well, sir, and have brought in a few horses since you left."

"Any booty?"

"No, sir, fer they didn't want ter strike fer booty unless you led 'em."

"They were right, for horse-stealing is one thing, and pillaging is another."

"I am in time for supper, I hope?"

"Yes, sir, ther boys hasn't eaten theirn yit."

Riding into the timber the horseman, as though familiar with the surroundings, took a path leading down to the meadow, and as he drew near the camp-fires was greeted with a cheer.

A tall man, with a fearful scar on his face, for he took off his feather head-dress as he approached his chief, came forward and said:

"I'm glad ter see yer, cap'n."

"Well, Knife-Face, I wanted to get here sooner, but was detained to look into some affairs, for things are not going just right up the country; but you have your camp looking in good shape, and I am glad you keep the men up to the mark."

"I do the best I can, sir; but yer know they don't regard me same as they does you."

"Do they not mind you in all things?"

And the eyes of the captain flashed with anger.

"Oh, yes, cap'n; but then they knows ther difference atween me and you."

"Use that ugly knife of yours on two or three of them, or shoot them, and you'll teach them to respect you; and you've got to have the respect and the fear of men as wild as they are, to make them mind."

"I'll get them down to it in time, sir, for I'm young yet as lieutenant; but you say things hain't going right up ther kentry."

As the two men had been speaking, the captain had dismounted and an outlaw had led his horse away, while Knife-Face, as the lieutenant was called on account of the fearful mark he bore, the mark of a bowie, conducted his chief to a brush shanty a little apart from the others.

"That is right, Knife-Face, to have your wicky-up here, for never herd with your men; but you ask me about the trouble up the country?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, this kidnapping of that gir has created a sensation, I assure you."

"Will ther Regulators turn out to look her up?"

"Oh, no; for the Regulators will not move without orders from their captain," was the reply, with a smile.

"What then, sir?"

"There are others on her track that are worse than all the Regulators in Kansas."

"No!"

"It is so."

"Was they them that ranged across the prairie one night, right in our trail?"

"Yes."

"They meant biz, cap'n."

"They did, indeed."

"Did yer find out who they was?"

"Yes."

"Now, I w'u'd like ter know."
 "You have heard of Wild Bill?"
 "Now I has."
 "And Texas Jack?"
 "You bet."
 "And White Beaver?"
 "Ther Surgeon Scout?"
 "Yes."
 "I knows of him, you asks me?"
 "I did."
 "Ther man they calls also ther Magic Doctor?"
 "The same."
 "And Mighty Medicine-man o' ther Winnebagoes?"
 "You know the man I mean, I see."
 "Waal, cap'n, don't yer think my face are a leetle disfiggered?"
 "It is certainly not as bloomingly beautiful on one side as it is on the other."
 "Thar is a scar from jest above my right temple clean down under my jaw ter my throat."
 "No one would contradict you on that point, Knife-Face."
 "Waal, cap'n, it were ther last-named gent as give me the scar."
 "White Beaver?"
 "Yas."
 "How was that?" asked the chief, with considerable interest.
 "I was a soldier then, and he were the fort surgeon, and was to come through from one fort to another with the paymaster."
 "I thought I'd git rich all in a heap, so I broke ther leetle plan I hed ter three other boys, and we arranged ter desert and then take ther Doc and ther money-slinger in on ther pararer."
 "It all worked well up ter ther time we made our attack, for we deserted all right, then reached the canyon, whar we was ter head off ther ambulance, which they was drivin' over in, and they come through on time."
 "But when we were shootin' ther mules, so as ter hev 'em afot, thet durned Doctor Beaver jist tuk a notion ter shoot us."
 "He dropped one o' my pards fu'st fire, and we opened and wounded ther money-slinger, when out o' ther old huss comed Beaver, shootin' quick as lightnin' on a dark night, and another o' my pards went down in a heap, and ther third run."
 "But I were gold-hungry, and jumped fer ther Doc with my knife, when durned ef he didn't twist it from me, and in no time I hed it down ther face."
 "He thought I were dead, and so went to his pard in ther huss, hitched up my hoss in place o' ther mule we hed kilt and druv on, while I well-nigh died with this gash."
 "He got to ther fort all right with ther money and ther paymaster, whom he doctored up to life all right, and I carries this little dimple ter remind me of him."
 "And you cannot readily forget him, if you ever look in a glass; but he is with Wild Bill and Texas Jack, and they are not all."
 "More of ther same sort, cap'n?"
 "Yes."
 "I calls yer."
 "They are Frank North, White Chief of the Pawnees, Night Hawk George, Broncho Billy, and there were three more in the band."
 "Nine of 'em?"
 "Yes."
 "Of a kind?"
 "The other three were Bravo Buck, Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick."
 "Whoop 'em up fer ther Lord's sake! Why, cap'n, they is ther deadeadest dead shots on 'arth, and is bolder than a wall o' rock."
 "Is them nine on our trail?"
 "Six o' 'em are."
 "And the other three?"
 "Will not trouble us, I assure you," was the laconic remark of the Red Owls' chief.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PLOT OF THE RED OWLS.

"THEM three is dead? Waal, thar is six more of 'em, cap'n, and I'd rather charge a fort than meet 'em," was the remark of Knife-Face, in response to the last remark of the captain.
 "They are a bad lot, I admit, to fight; but it is their end or ours, for those men mean business from the jump, Knife-Face."
 "I knows it, pard."
 "They are six and we are thirty-one."
 "I wish we had the lieutenant and Brandy Ben with us again, fer they'd add to our number."
 "But two more only; but what became of the former I do not know, yet I hardly think he deserted us; but as for Brandy Ben, he turned traitor."
 "You don't mean it, cap'n?"
 "Yes, for he led the scouts to the ranch."
 "No!"
 "He did, for I got it from Foxy himself, who, smart as the scouts were, got away with three of them."
 "If we only could capture Brandy Ben, wouldn't ther boys hev a picnic with him?"
 "He knows the fearful penalty that follows a traitor to our league, Knife-Face; but now we

must arrange a plot to get those six scouts in our power."
 "I'd rather have 'em dead than catch 'em alive, cap'n."
 "We must kill them."
 "That's the music, but where are we to raise ther tune, cap'n?"
 "My plan is to send two of our band with the horses down to the retreat in the Indian Territory, while we move against the scouts."
 "That takes two of the gang and leaves but twenty-nine of us, cap'n."
 "Yes, twenty-nine to fight six."
 "Them six don't count as thet number, cap'n; thar was four of us tackled ther White Beaver, as yer heerd me tell."
 "Well, we are six to one, as it were."
 "No, Knife-Face, we have got to meet those men and get away with them."
 "If we do, no others will come down here looking us up, and the soldiers and settlers will go slow in attacking us; but if we do not, then our usefulness is ended."
 "Whar is they, cap'n?"
 "At the ranch."
 "Yer don't say it?"
 "Oh, yes, they took it by strategy, through Brandy Ben's treachery, and they hold the fort, with Bouncer and Tonkaway, the Chinees and one of the cattlemen prisoners."
 "Now they is havin' it the'r own way, hain't they?"
 "Too much so."
 "And you hes a leetle keerd yer kin play ag'in' 'em?"
 "Yes."
 "Waal, cap'n, you know me."
 "And the men I can depend on I think?"
 "As the parson does on a deacon."
 "Now, my idea is to get one of the men to dress up and look like a settler, so who is it that will make the best one of the lot?"
 "Quaker Tom."
 "The very man, for he looks it."
 "Yes, he hev a most angelic-like figurehead fer a horse-thief, cap'n."
 "He can go with us to the place I have in view for an ambush, which is the Lost Canyon, and he can ride hard to the ranch, see the scouts, tell them he is a settler, his home has been pillaged, and his cattle stolen, while a few of the Red Owls, with a young girl as a prisoner have camped in the Lone Motte, and he will offer to guide them to it."
 "They will bite at the bait, thinking the girl is Miss Bradford, and five of them will start, for they will doubtless leave one to guard the prisoners at the ranch."
 "Quaker Tom can lead them right through Lost Canyon, and we can lay in wait there and have them at our mercy."
 "Cap'n, thet are a trump keerd and will take ther deck."
 "I think so; now call Quaker Tom here."
 "Knife-Face left the shanty and soon returned with a man who certainly would have passed anywhere for a preacher."
 "He was clean-shaven, for his razor, his pack of cards and his belt of arms he never went without, and it was this benign look that had gotten him the name of Quaker Tom."
 "You want me, cap'n?" he asked as he approached the wicky-up.
 "Yes, Quaker Tom, I want you for a special duty."
 "I'm yer man, cap'n."
 "There was a band of nine scouts came down here from the army up country, but what for I do not know, but they have gotten on our trail and are ugly toward us."
 "Three of them they have lost, but the other six hold the ranch, and it is their intention to cause us trouble."
 "Now, I have a plan to entrap them, and you can do it by playing honest settler, telling a story I will school you in, and then lead them into our ambush."
 "You are to ride a white horse and lead them so we will know you and shoot so as not to harm you, and at our first volley you are to spur off as fast as you can and join us, helping to make short work of them."
 "I'll do it; but I hope the boys won't make any mistake in their shooting."
 "How can they, when you will be on a white horse and the scouts all ride dark ones?"
 "I'll take the chances, cap'n."
 "I knew that you would, Quaker Tom, and you'll not regret it when we divide the booty."
 "Thankee, sir."
 "And, supper being ready, the captain went to the camp-fire of Knife-Face and the two ate together."
 "Soon after the meal was over the call was made to saddle up, and four men were sent with the stolen horses down to a rude secluded rendezvous in the Indian territory, while the band of Red Owls, numbering just twenty-seven with their leader, set out across the prairie, riding in single file and looking like a huge serpent crawling over the plain."
 "It was just dawn when they arrived at the Lost Canyon and went into camp in the wild spot, which was a rugged bit of country in the midst of a prairie."
 "There was a dense thicket, the timberland was

seamed with ravines, and one had been so washed down by heavy rains as to have earned the name of canyon.

Through this a trail ran, and here was the spot selected for ambuscading the scouts.

The sides of the canyon were overgrown with dwarfed trees, and it certainly was a secure hiding-place for a foe meaning mischief.

That no sign of their trail might be visible to alarm they approached the timberland from the opposite direction to that they expected the scouts to come, and went into camp about a spring in the hollow, making themselves as comfortable as possible.

A breakfast was soon prepared, and then, after guards were set, to prevent surprise, the messenger, Quaker Tom, started off on his red errand, having learned well the lesson he had to play from his chief.

Mounted upon a white horse, which had been led purposely through the long night's march, he set off at a lively pace toward Kennard's ranch.

After a couple of hours' ride he halted and camped in a piece of timber, to rest and await the time to move, for he wished to reach the ranch just before sunset, so as to have the scouts enter the ambush during the night.

After a long rest and a refreshing sleep, he mounted his horse, and putting him at a rapid pace, headed for the ranch.

She south-bound trail wound around the outer stockade wall, and following this it carried him near the water, up to which he dashed at full speed, his horse panting hard, and he wearing the look of one who had just passed through some dreadful ordeal.

Broncho Billy was on duty at the gate, and seeing the stranger took him for just what he pretended to be, a frightened settler, and as he let him into the gate called out:

"What is it, pard—Injuns?"

"Oh, far worse!" was Quaker Tom's response, as he sprung from his panting horse and approached Broncho Billy.

CHAPTER XXIX.

QUAKER TOM'S STORY.

WHEN Quaker Tom, the wicked emissary of a still more wicked master, rode inside of the ranch gate and sprung from his horse he gave a sigh of relief, as though he felt that at last his life was safe.

Broncho Billy had seen his approach long before he reached the gate, and had reported it to Wild Bill, who with White Beaver and others gathered at the gate just as Quaker Tom rode in.

"Well, my man, you say it is worse than Indians?" Wild Bill asked, for he had heard Broncho Billy's question and the stranger's answer.

"Yes, cap'n, they are worse, fer they are Red Owls," was the trembling reply.

"Ha! the Red Owl Rangers?"

"Yes, pard."

"To the north of us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are they and what have they been doing?"

"They are in the settled country beyond Lone Timber, and they have raided the ranches, killed all who attacked them, and have sent off more than half of their men with horses they stole, among which were all of mine, excepting Snowball there, and he I escaped on."

"What is your name, sir?"

"Parson Tellfair, sir."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of such a minister in Kansas, and I am glad you escaped."

"I only did so when I saw I could do no good, and I was riding to Prairie City to get help, for a dozen of the Red Owls are camped in the Lone Timber, and I saw them fixing up bush shelters as though they intended to remain all night, while the others went southward with their booty and horses."

"And there are about a dozen in Lone Timber?"

"Yes, sir, ten or a dozen, but not more."

"Was ther chief with that party?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe him, please, parson."

"He dresses with great worldliness, in a Mexican garb, and is a very handsome man, and don't look wicked."

"You saw him close then?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did it happen?"

"You see they had me a prisoner, but I escaped."

"Ah, yes, and did you hear the men call him by name?"

"Captain they called him, and I think I heard one say something like Captain Kenton."

"Was it Kennard?"

"That's it, sir."

"And he is in Lone Timber?"

"Yes, sir, and he has with him a poor girl, a prisoner, I felt most sorry for."

"She told me she was from Prairie City, where her uncle owned a ranch, and—"

"Describe her!" quickly said Wild Bill, while the others pressed around more closely.

"She's very pretty, sir; but I am not good at describing ladies."

"She had great big eyes, I know, and wore a riding-habit, while Captain Kennard, as you said his name was, called her Belle, as though he knew her well."

"Miss Belle Bradford! a thousand to one on it."

"Come, boys, we start in two hours for the Lone Timber, and you, sir, must be our guide, so come over to camp, get something to eat, and then go to sleep for you look tired out," and Wild Bill led the stranger away, while Texas Jack relieved Broncho Billy on duty at the gate.

Hardly had he taken his position, when his eyes fell upon some one coming across the prairie.

Viewing him closely through his glass, he said to White Beaver who stood near:

"White Beaver, yonder comes that brave boy, and he seems to be following on the parson's trail."

"What can he be doing, coming alone from that direction?"

"He's a plucky fellow, Jack, and has doubtless been off on some hunt of his own, and perhaps brings us news."

In a short time Brad Buckner rode up to the ranch, and was warmly welcomed by both Texas Jack and White Beaver.

"Well, boy pard, what are you doing here, and alone?" asked Beaver.

"I've been looking for cousin Belle, sir, for, after I left your camp, I saw her that night, alone upon the prairie; but she ran away from me, and I fear she has gone crazy with her troubles."

"I think not, my lad, from what I have just heard, and if things go right, we may bring her to you to-morrow."

"Oh, sir! what do you mean?" cried Brad.

"There comes Wild Bill, and he will tell you all," and Wild Bill just then came up and greeted the boy, after which he said:

"Beaver, what do you think of that parson?"

"I don't like his looks; but that has nothing to do with helping him."

"I don't place confidence in him, from some reason; but then we must not hesitate to go after the Red Owls, as the lady speaks of is certainly Miss Bradford," and turning to Brad, Wild Bill continued:

"My lad, a man just came to us, a parson from a settlement to the north, beyond the Lone Timber, and he tells us that the Red Owls have been raiding that country, run off southward a large number of horses, and packs of booty, and that a few remained encamped in the Lone Timber, with a lady captive whom their chief called Belle, and we feel that it must be your cousin."

"Captain Bill, I followed a trail of just twenty-eight horses up from where I struck it near our ranch, to the Lost Canyon, and wherever they were, they camped there, for I saw the smoke of their fires at noon."

"I was afraid to venture in, for I found on the trail an old worn-out Red Owl head-dress, and I thought they must be Owls; but it was not at Lone Timber they were."

"This is strange."

"Then I saw a man ride out of Lost Canyon, and come in this direction, and I struck his trail and followed it."

"He stopped in some timber and, as he staid there a long time I laid down on the prairie in waiting; but at last he came out, and then he rode away in a full run, and his trail leads to this ranch."

"Indeed! and how was he riding before going into the timber?"

"Very slow, and he was asleep there."

"How long?"

"Several hours, for I went to sleep too, lying on the prairie."

"What kind of a horse did he ride?"

"A white horse, sir."

"The parson, sure."

"Yes, Bill, and he said he had ridden in a run all the way from Lone Timber, and Brad says he came from Lost Canyon, and rode slow until he got near the ranch."

"He will bear watching!"

"Yes, Beaver, the parson will bear watching; but we must not let him know that we suspect him, and I'll go and have another talk with him," and Wild Bill went back to join the pretended parson.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BOY SENTINEL.

"I DON'T half like this party, for there seems more man in them than I has been used to seein' together in one gang," said Quaker Tom, as he sat by the camp-fire in the ranch, gazing at the Dead Shots, who were preparing to start upon the march to Lone Timber, under his suggestion.

"Then, too," he added to himself, "Cap'n Kent said as how they numbered but six, three of 'em having been killed or got lost; but thar is nine o' 'em here, that's certain, and that makes three to one in our little scrimmage surprise-party we is fixing for them."

"Now, three to one is big odds in most cases, but just here is a case where the odds kinder seem small."

"Waal, I is in for it, and so is the boys, and

we must wipe out, or get scalded, for once these men get into a fight, they will stick as long as life and flesh hold together."

"Now, there is that Buckner boy, thick as wool with the scouts, and I don't like that, for he's got a heap o' prairie sense fer his age, and he's doubtless on the trail of his sister, cousin, or whatever she is to him."

"But he might as well give up seeing her, with the man running this trick-game that is doing it, for Cap'n Kent's a team, and no mistake."

"I wish these scouts would start, for I'm gettin' kinder nervous waitin', and wish the work was done with."

"I think I was a fool to come, for though all seems to work well, yet somehow it don't."

So Quaker Tom talked away to himself, as he watched the preparations of the scouts for the trail.

At last Wild Bill came to him and said they were ready to mount.

"Are these nine men all you have, friend?" he asked, assuming his deacon-like drawl again, to carry out his story of being a preacher.

"What more do you want, parson?"

"There are only nine of you."

"Nine are enough," was the quiet response.

"I'm thinkin' they are too many," muttered Quaker Tom to himself, and he mounted his white horse, which now seemed quite rested, and the party moved out of the ranch.

"I leave you to keep house, Brad," called out Wild Bill, as they rode away.

"Wish I could go," called out the boy dolefully.

"You have all you can do to look after things here, Brad, and we won't be gone long," answered Bill, and they rode on across the prairie, while Brad closed the gate and locked it.

His position was by no means an enviable one, for he had as prisoners the two Indians, Bouncer, Cowboy Kit and the Chinese servants.

The latter Wild Bill had wished to put in irons, as were the others, but Brad thought this was a confession of his inability to look after them, so urged against it.

"Keep your eye on them, boy pard, for they are slippery rascals, although they profess friendship for us now," Bill had said to him.

"I'll watch them," returned Brad, and, after the departure of the scouts he went to the cabin where the prisoners were and saw that they were secure.

"Waal, youngster, you has a heap on your shoulders ter look arter us all by your little lone," said Cowboy Kit.

"Oh, no, for you are ironed, and if iron won't keep you quiet, lead will," was the boy's retort, and he tapped his pistol significantly.

"Holy saints! ef you hain't a boy and a half, I'll eat Squaw Sallie's moccasins," Bouncer remarked.

"Me kill boy, me get loose some time," said Sallie viciously.

"No you won't, Sallie," gayly returned Brad, and he walked over and examined the irons of the squaw most carefully.

"How is it with you, Chief Sal?" he asked, turning to the chief.

The Indian chief deigned no reply, and Brad left the cabin, leaving the door ajar.

He saw the two Chinese curled up, as though asleep, near the fire, and entering a tent near, which the scouts had brought out of the cabin and put up for their convenience, he threw himself down upon the blankets, in such a way that the Chinese could see him.

For some time he lay there, and then gradually worked a blanket into a roll and left it in his place, his hat over one end.

Out under the rear wall of the tent he crawled, and going off in the timber he sat down to watch the Chinamen.

Before long the head of one of them popped up, then the other, and they seemed to be conversing earnestly together.

The fire burned brightly and distinctly showed their movements, and Brad saw one of them draw a long knife, glance at it, and then rise and walk on tip-toe toward the tent.

"That fellow is going to stick a hole in that blanket, thinking it is me," said the boy, and he swung his repeating-rifle around for use.

As the Chinese reached the tent he halted, the other watching him closely, and raising the flap with one hand he bent over and looked within, grasping his murderous knife with the other.

"Wonder if I can do it? I'll try, for the glitter from the firelight makes it a good mark," said Brad, and almost instantly he leveled and fired his rifle.

There was a yell from both Chinamen as the knife was broken by the bullet, and, while one ducked down, as though asleep, the intended assassin plunged for the fire and threw himself down in terror by the side of his comrade.

It was evident that they did not think the boy fired the shot.

"I guess I'll have to use the irons Captain Wild Bill left for them," said Brad, and he got up and walked toward the fire.

Both Heathen were sound asleep, to all appearances, while Brad took up two pairs of handcuffs and quickly slipped one wristlet on the hand of each.

The other pair was then placed on the Chinamen, whose arms were thus secured, and they were chained together by this ingenious ironing, back to back.

A revolver in Brad's hand kept the two victims asleep, for they did not open their eyes.

"You are the soundest sleepers I ever saw, and you'll be surprised when you wake up in the morning to find how you got ironed together," said Brad, laughing at the cunning rascals.

"Ho, youngster! what's that shot?" called out Bouncer from the cabin.

"Don't talk so loud, or you'll wake up the Chinamen."

"What's ther matter with ther Heathen?"

"They're asleep."

"Dead?"

"No; only asleep."

"Who fired that shot?"

"I did."

"What at?"

"Chinese Pepper."

"What were he doin'?"

"Trying to cut a hole in my blanket, thinking I was in it."

"Boy, you hain't asleep, that's sart'in," growled Bouncer.

Brad laughed and then walked down toward the stockade gate to take a look out on the prairie.

He went through the shutter in the big gate and gazed out over the prairie with his glass.

No object was in sight and he re-entered the inclosure and closed the shutter, when he distinctly heard a sound in the shanty known as the guard-house and which had been the quarters of Foxy.

Slipping up to the window, he glanced cautiously within.

The moon shone through the open door and window revealing a part of the interior distinctly and, to the amazement of the boy, the flooring in one corner seemed to be rising upward.

Still looking, he beheld what appeared to be a huge trap-door slowly open, and a head appeared above it and glanced cautiously around.

It was an ugly, savage head as the moonlight fell upon it, and not knowing what might follow Brad quickly leveled his revolver and fired.

A yell, a fall, the heavy bang of the trap-door, and all was silent once more.

Entering the guard-house, Brad took up the lantern kept there and which he had seen that evening and lighted it.

A survey showed him that the trap-door seemed so thoroughly a part of the flooring that it was not strange that it had not been noticed before, for no one suspected a subterranean chamber beneath the little shanty.

Securing some pieces of wood the boy soon had the door chocked up so that it could not be opened from below, and then, leaving the lamp burning, he went back toward the camp, saying to himself:

"Guess I won't have such a dull time after all to-night."

"But I wonder if I killed that fellow, for I shot to do so, as I expected others to follow."

"What a surprise this will be to Captain Wild Bill and the boys."

"Now to see if that old squaw is all right, for I'm afraid of her," and he lighted a lantern and entered the cabin, for the moon did not give light enough for him to see plainly within doors.

"Oh, yes, you are all right," he said, as he gazed at the squaw's irons and then the others.

"What was thet shootin' ag'in, boy?" growled Bouncer.

"He's been killin' ther Heathen, thet's sart'in, and we gets no breakfast in the morning," answered Cowboy Kit.

"No, the Chinese are all right, and sleeping soundly."

"Nothing disturbs them."

"Then what was you shootin' at, young feller, distarbin our rest, fer I hes heerd two guns go off?"

"Do you know a fellow with a big head, long red hair and beard, and I think without any nose?"

The two men glanced at each other, and Bouncer said:

"Thar is a man like you describes, whom we calls Nosey, 'cause he hain't got no nose."

"Where is he?"

"Dunno."

"What does he do?"

"Cowboy."

"Has you seen him?" asked Cowboy Kit.

"Yes."

"Whar?"

"Oh, he was snoopin' round."

"And you shot him?"

"Don't be curious," said Brad, and he turned away, while Bouncer muttered:

"Durn thet boy, I say."

Going out of the cabin, after what had happened, Brad determined to keep wide awake, and to continually patrol the grounds for fear of being surprised.

This he did until just before dawn, when going

to the gate he discerned out upon the prairie a party of horsemen approaching the ranch.

"Oh, Lordy! are they the scouts, or the Red Owls?" he said, anxiously, and he turned his glass upon the coming party, well knowing his danger if they were the outlaw band.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE LOST CANYON AMBUSH.

THERE was no more satisfactory spot to be found than was the Lost Canyon for an ambush.

If nature had intended it for the scene of a deadly attack upon an unsuspecting foe, I doubt if it could have been improved upon.

It was simply a vale, washed by torrents in rain-storms, and the sides rising rugged and steep, with thickets to serve as hiding-places for an enemy.

The trail ran through this canyon, at least those who made the timber a camping-place followed it, while others, either soldiers on the march, wagon-trains or hunters went around it, unless very sure that its covert did not conceal an enemy.

With their horses staked out back in the timber, the band of Red Owls settled themselves for a day of rest.

They built fires at noon, in the canyon, and enjoyed a good dinner, for there was plenty of game along.

In the afternoon they lolled about, card-playing, chatting, smoking or sleeping, as the humor took them, while Captain Kent amused himself with a novel and a cigar, calm, indifferent, and hopeful of his trap's success.

As night came near, supper was cooked, and the haversacks were filled, the canteens also.

The serapes and blankets were gathered up and strapped to the saddles, the horses were rubbed down, watered, and placed in position where they were wanted, and every vestige of fire in the canyon was put out.

Then the men were shown their posts, by the chief, a dozen being placed along the sides of the canyon, six on either side, and hidden in the thicket.

These were to begin the attack by a volley of riflery.

The remainder of the party were to be equally divided, and to stand by their horses, and so stationed that they could dash into the canyon from either side in a charge, the moment the volley was fired.

This would prevent the escape of any of the scouts not killed by the first fire upon them.

"Remember, men, that horseflesh is valuable, and these men ride the finest animals to be found on the border, so let no horse be killed, or even wounded.

"Aim at the heads and hearts of the men, the right hand party firing first, and the left-hand following immediately.

"Then we will dash into the canyon, at either end, but use no weapon unless needed, so that no harm is done to each other.

"I want every man at his post now, and though we have hours to wait, it is worth it.

"I will go off on the prairie and act as scout, and return and report in ample time the coming of our foes.

"Then there is another thing, and I will be obeyed in it.

"That is that no man shall smoke a cigar or pipe, for a night like this the flavor of tobacco smoke may travel for miles, and the men we have to deal with are the kings of the border in all that is cunning, brave and deadly, so make no mistakes, if we are over four to one against them, with the odds of a surprise.

"Another thing, is to take good care not to harm Quaker Tom.

"I made him ride a white horse on purpose, and he will be as far ahead as he dare go.

"Now you know your work, so do it, for if Wild Bill and his Dead Shots whip us, the Red Owls have got to seek another climate than Kansas."

Such was the talk that Captain Kent gave his men, and they listened with respectful silence.

Then he placed each party in the position he wanted them, and gave to each their individual instructions over again, after which he called to Knife-Face and said:

"Come with me."

Out upon the prairie they went, both on foot, until they came to a rise that commanded a view for quite a long distance, in the direction that the scouts must come.

Throwing a serape upon the grass, the two men sat down upon it, their faces toward their coming foes.

"Now, Knife-Face, you will have a chance to even up on White Beaver for that scar he gave you."

"I hope so, pard cap'n; but I knows heaps about the Surgeon Scout, and them men he has with him, and I'm just a leetle dubious."

"Don't croak, Knife-Face."

"If I did not know you to be a brave man, I would believe you to be a coward."

"No, cap'n, I hain't no coward; but we hain't to fight Injuns or ordinary fellers."

"Well, we could not have more in our favor than we have."

"No, cap'n, and we need it," was the honest reply.

Captain Kent frowned, for the doubts of his lieutenant were not pleasant to him.

But he felt secure in numbers and position, against nine men, be they whom they might, and so he was content to abide the result.

Thus time passed away, and at last the chief leveled his glass over the prairie and said:

"They are coming!"

"Waal, cap'n, we'll go and warn ther boys."

"But, Knife-Face?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"There are ten."

"No, pard."

"Yes, the one in advance is Quaker Tom, for I recognize his white horse, and nine men follow him."

"I thought you said there was but six!"

"So I did, for three were extracted from the nine; but there are nine now, that is certain, and I do not know what it means."

"Then we are but three to one, cap'n."

"If even, I would fight them, for it's our only chance," was the determined reply of the chief, as he turned and walked back to the timber, Knife-Face by his side.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A VISIT TO BUCKNER RANCH.

SEVERAL days after the visit of Major Buckner to Captain Tayloe's room in the Overland Palace Hotel, where he met Andy Tayloe, who had won the border *sobriquet* of Mexico, the army officer concluded to ride over to the Buckner Ranch and make a report he was anxious the ranchero should know.

"I think I am well enough to go with you, Arthur, and I will stay there, accepting the invitation and the offer the major so generously made me, for I am anxious to get out of this wild place, as my life is to know a change."

"Well, Andy, I will be glad to have you go, and I will order my ambulance instead of going on horseback, so the fatigue will not be too much for you," said the captain.

"You are ever thoughtful of me, Arthur, and I know it has been hard for you to come here and take care of me all these long weeks, but I shall prove my appreciation by my changed life."

"Now help me to dress, and then I'll be ready."

Half an hour after the ambulance of Major Tayloe, drawn by a pair of fine mules and driven by his negro attendant, set off from the Overland Hotel across the prairie.

"He had a close call," said one who saw the haggard, white face of Andrew Tayloe.

"Yes; but wasn't he game to the hilt?"

"I guess he'll be kinder boss about here when he gits well," remarked another.

Driving on their way, the brothers talked together, the fresh air doing the wounded man a great deal of good.

At length Buckner Ranch, known as The Fort, was reached, and the two received a warm welcome from both the major and his sister, the latter sad-faced and anxious-looking.

"Your room will be ready for you in a minute, Mr. Tayloe, and you had best seek rest, for you have had a long ride," said the major.

A glass of milk with an egg broken in it refreshed Andy Tayloe and he sought rest on a comfortable bed, while his brother, the major and Mrs. Bradford adjourned to the dining-room.

After the meal was over Major Buckner led his guest out upon the porch and said:

"You have news?"

"Yes, some little."

"Please tell me all."

"Well, sir, Kent Kennard has not been seen in Prairie City since your visit there."

"Yes, he left the night I did, and we rode together for some distance."

"Ahl did you—"

"No, though I was tempted to, for I read your question in your looks."

"We parted with a threat on his part against me and mine if I did not bring Belle back, for he had the cool effrontery to accuse me of sending her off and laying the charge of kidnapping on him."

"Cool indeed, sir; but I thought that I would tell you that he had not been seen in Prairie City since, and also that rumors of horses and cattle having been run off by the Red Owls are frequent."

"I have heard as much, and I keep my cattle corraled, and all my cowboys on duty near."

"You are right, sir; but no word has come to you of your niece?"

"No, yet I am hopeful, for there are those on her trail that will find her if men can."

"I refer to that remarkable man, Wild Bill, and his followers."

"Where are they?"

"They are coolly located at Kent Kennard's ranch, having taken forcible possession."

"Only this morning my son, who will have his way and go off alone, started for the ranch to see the scouts, and I hope he may bring me good news to-morrow."

"He is a brave boy, Major Buckner; but you should force him to stay at home."

"He is wild about his cousin's capture, and seems to blame himself for it, so is doing all he can to be the means of getting her back."

"But when do you return to the fort, captain?"

"To-morrow, sir, as I have my brother in such good hands, and I am anxious to get back, as I know the colonel will let me take fifty men, when he knows all, and start on the trail of these Red Owls to run them down."

"A splendid idea, Captain Tayloe, and one which I hope you can carry out."

"I will do all in my power, sir, so look for me again within ten days, with a company of gallant troopers at my back."

"By the way, sir, how many cowboys have you?"

"A dozen, sir, and altogether, servants and cattlemen, there are seventeen males upon the ranch."

"You may need them, so keep them well in hand for use, and, should Brad discover anything of the scouts, pray notify me, as I will not leave the Overland until to-morrow afternoon."

Farewells were then said, and Captain Tayloe took his leave of his hospitable host, and started upon his return to Prairie City.

The next morning the gallant captain paid his bill at the Overland Palace, packed up his luggage, put it in his ambulance, and mounting his horse, while Arab, his negro, drove the vehicle, he was bidding good-by to "the boys" and landlord Sands, when up dashed a cowboy, his horse showing signs of having been hard ridden.

"You are Captain Tayloe, sir?" he said, politely.

"Yes, my man."

"Here's a letter for you, sir."

"From the fort, I suppose," and the captain took the letter.

"No, sir, from Major Buckner."

"Ah, yes," and opening the envelope the captain read:

"It will not be very far out of your way to come by my ranch, so please do so, for I have important information for you."

"I will go with pleasure, my man."

"Go in and take something," and the captain treated the cowboy to "suthin' wet an' a smoker," after which the two rode out of Prairie City together, the ambulance following.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TEXAN RANGER.

"It seems second nature to me to follow a trail, and here I am, going to see my sweetheart, and yet losing time following these tracks."

"But I can't help it, and they have a suspicious look to me, and may lead me on to an important discovery."

The speaker was a young man, with a face deeply bronzed, wearing no beard, and with every feature expressive and full of character.

His hair was golden, worn in massing waves upon his shoulders, and his eyes were blue, tender in expression and shaded by long black lashes that a woman would envy.

His form was slender, wiry, broad-shouldered and straight as a soldier's.

He wore upon his head a thoroughly Mexican sombrero, most richly embroidered with gold and silver, and looped up on the left side by a diamond spur pin.

His dress was gray jacket and pants, the latter stuck in the tops of cavalry boots, the former ornamented with brass buttons upon which were stamped a five-pointed star, each point bearing a letter, forming the word TEXAS.

A brown silk shirt, with black scarf tied with a sailor knot, a pair of gold-mounted spurs with tiny bells attached, and a belt of arms completed his personal make-up, while his horse, a long-bodied, clean-limbed roan, was equipped with a Texas saddle and bridle, in the rear of the former being a leather roll, a valise, a serape and oilskin blanket, and at the horn hung a serviceable lariat.

The horseman had halted on the banks of a small stream, across which led a well-worn trail, and while his horse was drinking the keen eyes of the rider had detected hoof-tracks in the bottom of the stream.

Those he saw were not made by buffalo, deer, or cattle, but by horses.

There were certainly wild horses to be found there in that vicinity, but they were not shod—these hoof-tracks were.

The tracks led down the bed of the stream, and had not been washed wholly away by the current, but were fast disappearing.

So down the stream the rider urged his horse, following the tracks.

The water rose to his saddle-girths, but he was not one to mind a ducking, if he had to.

Following the stream some half a mile or more, he saw the trail land by turning into a rivulet flowing into the larger current.

This too he followed into a wild and almost impassable country.

But on dry land, through canyons and over hills, the trail was very distinct, and he pressed steadily on.

At last he drew rein, for there came to his ears the neigh of a horse.

Going out of the trail he hid his horse in a

thicket, muffled his head to prevent his neighing, and walked along on foot to the top of a steep hill.

The summit was densely covered with underbrush, and it overlooked a valley completely shut in by hills, with seemingly only a narrow canyon-like entrance at either end.

Looking down into this narrow entrance, he saw that it was barricaded with logs, a small space, like bars, being left open.

He did not doubt but that the exit, a couple of miles away up the valley, was likewise guarded.

Upon one side of the valley flowed a stream, dashing swiftly along and foaming like a cataract.

It dashed out of a chasm in the hills, bordered the right range that formed the valley, rendering exit or entrance there impossible to four-footed animals, and upon the other side a wall-like ridge protected the vale.

But this was not all that the horseman saw, for the meadow lands, or vale, were dotted with horses, and a large drove of cattle were beyond, with a few sheep.

There were mustangs, mules and American horses visible, several hundred in number, while fully a thousand cattle were to be seen.

In a niche in the wall-like ridge were a number of tents, giving the appearance of a military encampment, and some wagons, or "prairie schooners," were seen near the further end, showing that there must be a wheel trail out of the other barrier.

Turning his glass, which hung about his shoulders, upon the distant camp, he muttered: "United States wagons, prairie schooners, farmers' carts, ambulances, and a carriage or two."

"They look bad, and this is no army outfit."

"No, this is an outlaw camp, horse-stealers, raiders, cattle-runners and cut-throats."

"That is just what they are."

"Ah! I smell tobacco," and approaching the edge of the chasm, he glanced over.

Seated on a log, fifty feet below him, was a man, smoking a pipe.

His rifle stood near, and his horse was tied to the barrier.

Upon a blanket spread upon the ground was a book, an object that looked like a dead owl with scarlet feathers, and a slouch hat.

"I see."

"That red feathery object gives the gentleman away."

"This is the secret hiding-place of the Red Owls of Kansas, down here in the Territory."

"If I only had my Texas Rangers, the camp would change masters; but they are far away."

"But I will go to a fort, which is not very far from Buckner Ranch, and lead a cavalry company down here on a little flyer."

"Now to retire in good order."

So saying, the young Texan beat a retreat, going back the way he had come and noting the trail carefully.

Arriving at the head of the ford he went on southward, camped alone in the forest that night, and the next day reached Buckner Ranch.

As he rode up, his roan horse stepping briskly in spite of his long trip, he was met by Major Buckner himself, who called out:

"Reynolds, my dear fellow, how glad I am to see you."

"And I to see you, major, though I will frankly confess I'll be more pleased to see Belle," said the young ranger, with a smile.

"Ah, my poor fellow, Belle is not with us."

The Texan staggered as though struck a blow, while he gasped:

"Dead!"

"No, no; but carried off by a wretch who was determined she should marry him; but you know all."

"Know all! In God's name, how should I?"

"You read my letters and Belle's."

"Not a line since I heard from Belle two months ago asking me to visit you all this fall, and here I am."

"You had no letter from me telling you that Kent Kennard, Belle's old lover, held a secret of our family, and would use it unless she married him?"

"I did not receive any such letter, for had I, he would never have had a chance to tell the secret; but has he married her?"

And the Texan was livid, while he added:

"If he has, by the God above, I will make her a widow!"

"Be calm, Ralph, and let us talk the matter over."

"Tell me all," he said, calmly, and Major Buckner did so.

"And this man forced from you, from Mrs. Bradford and Belle, your consent on account of the secret he holds?"

"He did, alas!"

"It must be a strange secret."

"It is, and I will make it known to you; but we all hoped against hope that something would prevent Belle's sacrifice, and she wrote you asking if you could not save her, and in a way to keep him from telling the secret."

"I received no letters, as I tell you."

"Then he has intercepted them, and, worse still, he forged a reply, for Belle had a letter

from you, as she supposed, telling her you could do nothing, and to marry him rather than have him make known the secret."

"It was an accursed forgery, for I never wrote such a letter."

"Oh! but that man shall rue this."

"And you think he is leader of the Red Owls?"

"I know it."

"Then I will break up his nest, which I know, and there he must have taken my poor Belle."

"I will go at once to the nearest fort, and—"

"No, I will send to Prairie City and ask Captain Tayloe, who leaves there to-day for his command, to come by here, and we will see what he says."

So the message was sent to Captain Tayloe, and that evening he drove up to the Buckner cabin, and until late at night did the major, his guest, and Andy Tayloe and Mrs. Bradford sit talking over plans to capture the Red Owl band, and in some way get rid of Kent Kennard before he could make known the strange secret held like a two-edged sword, over Belle Bradford and those she loved.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DOUBLE TRAP.

WE left Captain Kent, and Knife-Face, retreating rapidly to the timber surrounding Lost Canyon, after the former had discovered the approach of the scouts.

They passed the word rapidly to the men, to be on the alert, the Red Owl head-dresses were put on, the weapons gotten ready and all was soon in readiness to meet the Dead Shot Nine and annihilate them.

In anxious expectancy the Red Owls waited, and the scouts seemed an age in coming into view.

But soon they appeared, coming along at a slow walk, and as though expecting no dangerous trap awaiting them.

The leader was Quaker Tom, as the moonlight plainly revealed, for his white horse and white slouch hat were readily recognizable.

Behind him came a single horseman, evidently Wild Bill, the Red Owls thought, as he was leader, and next, two by two the others came, keeping close together.

Into the shadow of the timber they moved, and then down the grade into the canyon.

It was a trifle dark there, as the tall timber and the deep cut obscured the moonlight, but the party held on at the same pace.

Their guns were still hung at their backs, and they did not appear to have a suspicion of danger; in fact they seemed to ride lazily along as though not even in a hurry to save the maiden whom Quaker Tom had told they could rescue.

Past the first Red Owls in ambush they moved, and then loud rung out the command:

"Right squad, fire!"

The six rifles flashed together.

"Left squad, fire!"

The other six on the other side flashed.

"Charge!"

Pell-mell into the canyon, from either side, dashed the mounted Red Owls.

But they drew rein quickly.

Not a shot had been fired by the scouts.

It seemed that not a horse of the scouts had been hurt, so true was the Red Owls' fire; but still something was wrong, for the animals had huddled together in alarm, and strangest of all, *their riders still sat upon their backs.*

No, there was one exception, for the saddle of Quaker Tom was empty.

"Do you surrender?" shouted the outlaw chief, in trumpet voice.

No answer.

Then a volley of pistol-shots were fired.

The horses snorted with fright, but their riders raised no arm to defend themselves.

"Great God! are they dead, and yet keep their saddles?" cried the chief.

As he spoke, a terrific yell, such as brave men give when charging into battle, was heard ringing through the timber, and quickly following it came the crack of rifles.

From up in the timber came the firing, and it was directed upon the Red Owls.

In wild dismay they broke and fled, those that were mounted escaping, some one way, some another; but those who had lain in ambush on the canyon's sides were not near their horses, and they dropped here, there, everywhere, as the Dead Shot Nine came charging upon them on foot, and in a steady line.

The tables were turned, the scouts were firing now, the trappers had been trapped, and Wild Bill and his pals had won the fight.

Rushing down into the canyon they made the air ring with laughter, as they caught their horses, still bearing the dummy forms upon their backs, tied in the saddles.

"They've riddled my coat," cried Texas Jack.

"My hat is a sieve," Broncho Billy rejoined.

And so on the jokes ran, as the scouts gathered about their horses, removing the dummies they had rigged up to represent themselves.

The scouts were all but half-dressed, and all were bare-headed for coats, pants, serapes, shirts and hats had gone to "make up" the mock riders.

Several of the horses had been wounded, but none seriously, and White Beaver soon dressed their wounds, for not one of the party had been hurt.

There was a dead Red Owl for each of the nine, however, and several badly wounded.

These the Surgeon Scout looked after as tenderly as though they were honest men, and arrangements were made to bear them back to the Kennard Ranch.

Dismounted as they were, Wild Bill knew that pursuit of the mounted Red Owls would be useless, and he let them go.

Out of his hiding-place, ironed, came Quaker Tom, who had been forced to lead the "dummy nine," under promise of his life.

He had slipped from his horse and hidden at the first fire.

Stretchers were then made by cutting long slender saplings and fastening the ends, like a pair of shafts, on either side of the horses, by a harness made of lariats.

Lariats woven across between the shafts, behind the horse, then formed a support for the wounded outlaws, and among them was Knife-Face, the lieutenant.

Having decently buried the dead the scouts started back for Kennard Ranch.

"Pard, I know'd it," said Knife-Face, as White Beaver rode by his side, as he lay upon the stretcher.

"Knew what, my friend?" kindly asked the Surgeon Scout, who had dressed the wound of the outlaw as well as he could under the circumstances.

"Knewed it were coming."

"The attack?"

"No, pard, my end."

"I fooled with you once afore, and you gave me this scar, and somethin' told me you'd git me yet, and it were you who shooted me, for I seen yer draw trigger."

"Yes, I shot you; but I did not give you that scar."

"Yes, Surgeon Powell, you did, for I were one o' ther deserter sogers thet attempted ter rob yer and Paymaster Ames."

"By Heaven, but I know you now."

"Better have remained in the army, an honest soldier, my poor fellow, for you see what your life has ended with."

"I'll die then?"

"Surely."

"Oh, Lordy, surgeon, I hes been a fearful wicked man, and now the end hev come."

"When we gits to the ranch see if yer can't save me, and I'll be yer slave; but if yer can't do it, then say a prayer fer me, it will help me, maybe."

White Beaver was touched, and promised to do all he could for the man when they arrived at the ranch, though he knew that he must die, and soon.

"Yes, pard, fer yer ter pray fer a man yer has kilt with yer own han', it might help me, an' ef I should die, bury me decent with a Bible word, fer thet might keep a curse off o' my grave."

"Will yer, pard doctor?"

"I will," came the deep response of White Beaver, and he rode on in silence.

But when the gate of the stockade was thrown open by Brad, and they entered, he stepped to the side of the outlaw, and said:

"Now, my man, I will see if I can aid you any."

No response came, and the skilled fingers rested upon the brawny wrist to seek the pulse.

"He is dead!"

"God have mercy upon this man, whose life I have taken, be his sins ever so great!" said White Beaver, with face raised upward toward the skies, growing gray under the coming dawn.

"Amen!" presently said Frank North, who had heard all that had passed between his comrade and the outlaw.

With his own hands the Surgeon Scout dug a grave for Knife-Face, and consigned the body to it, repeating over it the burial service, which he knew well by heart.

"I have kept my word," he said, and he turned away, going to look after the other wounded outlaws.

"After you have finished there, Beaver, come to the gate and join me, for Brad has a surprise for us, he says," called out Wild Bill.

The two Chinese were now released, and set to getting breakfast, and they smiled blandly when Brad called out:

"Are you awake at last, Salt and Pepper?"

"Me wakee wide uppee," said Salt.

"Sleepee goodee," added Pepper.

"Yes, allee samee havee badee dream," mimicked Brad, as he walked off with Wild Bill and Night Hawk George, their steps taking them to the stockade gate, whither White Beaver soon after went and joined them, for he felt that the boy had indeed made some important discovery.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BRAD'S DISCOVERY.

WHEN White Beaver joined Wild Bill, Night Hawk and Brad at the stockade gate, he found

that the boy had kept his discovery a secret to make it known to all at once.

"You see, Captain Wild Bill," said Brad: "When I found the Chinese was going to kill me, I put the irons on both of them, and then walked down here for a lookout upon the prairie."

"I was standing right here, when I heard a noise in the shanty there, and it scared me, for I feared some one had gotten in."

"I slipped up to the window, and the moon showed me one end of the floor rising right up."

"Come, Brad, come," said Wild Bill with a smile.

"Oh, yes, Captain Bill, it did, as you will see."

"So I then saw a man's head appear."

"Ah!"

"And such a head he had, and face."

"He was red-headed, red-bearded, no-nosed, and the moonlight showed me he looked like a terror."

"He was about to jump out of the hole when I fired, and he went back with a yell, the trap closing after him."

"I choked it, so it could not be raised, and left it for you."

"Come, my brave boy, and we will see all about it," and Wild Bill, followed by the others entered the shanty.

The pieces of wood were knocked out, a corner of the trap was raised, and up went the flooring, revealing a large hole beneath.

It had been neatly cut down under the cabin, forming a pit some eight feet by four, and was all of six feet deep.

One end sloped from the center of the cabin, and the hoof-tracks in the soft earth showed that horses had been taken that way.

Under the edge of the cabin began a tunnel, six feet high by about three broad, just large enough to admit of a horse passing through.

It led off in the direction of the ranch cabin, and some eight feet under ground.

In the pit, lying with his fingers dug down into the ground was the man that Brad had shot.

"He is dead, my boy, and you aimed well, for you hit him in the head."

"That is right, always aim at a man's head, for a bullet there stops him, if it only wounds him, while you may shoot a man through the heart, and he may have strength to kill you afterward."

"Remember this, my boy."

"Yes, Captain Bill; but it makes me shudder to look at him, for I never killed a white man before, though I shot an Indian when a band attacked our home, and I hit him in the head, too."

"That was right."

"Now, boys, let us put this body above ground until we get time to put him under."

"Ah, here is a lantern, and as we may need more help, Brad, you run and tell Texas Jack and Broncho Billy to join us, and Frank North and the others to be on the alert, for we are not certain what we will find."

Brad ran on his errand in haste, and soon returned with the two scouts named, while he begged so to go that Wild Bill consented.

The tunnel led them for a long distance, and then a second one branched off, but only for a few feet before coming to another pit.

"I believe this is under Kennard's cabin," said White Beaver.

"I guess you are right, and there is a tunnel leading off toward that small gate."

"I'll soon see," said Broncho Billy, and while they took one lantern and went in one direction, the others ascended the slope and found themselves under a floor.

On an earth shelf there were lanterns, candles and a bag of provisions.

Pushing on the floor above them it rose, and they stepped out into the large lumber room of Kennard's cabin.

"Now we'll follow the main tunnel," said Bill, a grim smile of delight upon his face.

Entering the pit they were met by Jack and Broncho Billy, and they reported that the tunnel ended in a pit under the floor of the little guard-house at the gate in the stockade wall.

"There are hoof-tracks there, too," said Broncho Billy.

"That accounts for the mysterious disappearance of our three pardes," said White Beaver.

"Did you lose three?" asked Billy, with surprise.

"I thought you knew it."

"Oh, no; but I thought the three I saw to-day and last night looked different."

"Yes, Broncho Billy rode to the fort and got these last three boys from the scouts there, for we had to keep up the nine, Brad, to hold our good luck."

"I see," said Brad, and the party moved on once more.

A walk of a hundred feet and Beaver said:

"Hold on! I see daylight ahead."

"Yes," and the lanterns were given to Brad to keep back in the rear, and, armed with their revolvers the scouts moved forward.

A few steps brought them out into what was a rotunda, or earth chamber, some twenty feet long and ten feet wide.

It had also been dug out as had been the tunnels.

"Hello! here are our pardes!" cried a voice in the dim light, and Brad ran forward with the lanterns.

"Bravo Buck!" cried Wild Bill, as the form of the scout was seen lying prostrate upon the ground, while he was ironed hands and feet.

"What's left of me, pardes?" was the reply, and he added:

"Oh, I'm all right, only a little cramped and hungry."

"And Dick and Dan?"

"Do you see yonder hole?"

"Yes."

"Our keeper dragged them in there, because they would shout, hoping to be heard; but Lordy, in this deep hole the devil would be the first one to hear us, I think, and I didn't waste my breath."

Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick were then dragged out of their loathsome retreat, and they were all quickly relieved of their irons, as Brad had appropriated a bunch of keys which the noseless outlaw had on his belt.

Other surprises now revealed themselves, in that the earth chamber went to the side of a pool, the river having worked its way in there.

Over the opening of the artificial cave a canvas, painted just the color of the earth had been hung, so that any one seeing it from the other shore, or much nearer would never have noted the cheat.

In the pool was a light skiff with a paddle, both rudely made, yet serviceable.

The pool was deep, and once out of it, into the current, one would be borne swiftly down the river.

"How did you get caught, pardes?" asked Wild Bill.

"Very easy for us, for we were bagged, grabbed, and thrown into that hole in the cabin by men we didn't see," said Dandy Dick.

"Ditto me," said Bravo Buck.

"Our horses were led down, too, and the gang that got us took them into the river and skipped."

"When we got comfortably settled in our irons up came three more fellows with Bravo Buck, and he was left, too, while his captors just sailed off by water in that skiff, the horses swimming."

"Pretty soon Nosey came back, and he staid as a guard, and he told us we were to be killed as soon as the captain came; but he went up the tunnel last night and didn't show up again."

"Well, there was a reason for that, as Brad can tell you, for we owe your discovery to this brave boy, pardes."

"Now, let us get out of this hole; and now that I have got my old Nine Dead Shots back I will start for the haunt of the Red Owls, leaving our three comrades from the fort to look after the prisoners and this ranch," said Wild Bill.

"But do you know where the retreat is?" asked Dandy Dick.

"No; but we have caught the chaplain of the Red Owls, and he will feather his nest by telling us where the roost of the other birds can be found."

"If he don't, may the Lord have mercy upon him," was Wild Bill's very significant reply.

And he led the way back through the tunnel to the open air once more.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MEETING AT THE RANCH.

It would be hard to picture the delight of the Dead Shot Nine when they found their comrades again in their midst, and recovered, as it were, from the grave.

Anxious to push on against the secret retreat of the Red Owls, Wild Bill immediately arranged his plans to depart, for, although they held the ranch, had defeated the outlaws in a fight, and retaken their three missing comrades, the main objects of their coming had not been accomplished, for Belle Bradford had not been found, and Kent Kennard was still at large.

Nothing could be learned from the three scouts, who had been prisoners to the outlaws, regarding the strange woman on horseback, whether she was or was not Belle Bradford.

Bouncer, when questioned, said she was a specter; outside of that he knew nothing.

If Captain Kent was an outlaw, one of the Red Owl band, it was a secret to him.

His duty was to look after the gate, and he knew little else.

That there were secret passages he knew, for he had helped dig them, and the river had carried all the dirt away, as it was thrown into it.

If the men left the ranch by that way, they landed down the river and went on this way.

This was the extent of his knowledge.

As for Cowboy Kit, he knew little also, and said the underground tunnels had been dug as an escape from Indians, or outlaws, should they attack the ranch.

The Tonkaways were silent when asked, and the two Chinese simply smiled blandly and replied:

"Melican man knowee muchee; Chinaman knowee little bittee."

So, with "Parson Tom," as the scouts called Quaker Tom, as their guide, the Dead Shot Nine, accompanied by Brad Buckner, rode away from the ranch the afternoon following their return from Lost Canyon.

Wild Bill had left his three fort scouts, secured by Broncho Billy to replace Bravo Buck, Dashing Dan and Dandy Dick, as guards at the ranch, ordering that one was to keep on duty at the gate all the time.

With his original Nine then he sallied forth on his hunt for the Red Owl Rangers, and he felt assured that, scattered as they were, and alarmed, they would make for the general rendezvous, or retreat, wherever that was.

Brad was going with the scouts as far as home, and he insisted that they should stop at the ranch and meet his father, getting from him all points of information that might prove useful, and remain there all night.

As it would be after sunset when they reached the ranch, Wild Bill said they would go into camp there.

But Brad said:

"Oh, our house is as big as a young hotel, Captain Bill, and we can take care of you all, and will be glad to do so."

"You see the ranch was once the officers' head-quarters in the old fort, so we have plenty of room."

"We will stop there, Brad," said Wild Bill.

"And breed a famine in your kitchen department, boy pard," added Texas Jack.

"No you won't, for auntie keeps the commissary full all the time."

"Our commissary up at the fort is full all the time too, Brad," said White Beaver, alluding to the commissary captain at the fort, and the shout of laughter from the scouts proved that they understood the joke.

"I am very glad, Beaver," said Wild Bill, as they rode along, "that you made the suggestion you did."

"About the Red Owl masks?"

"Yes, and I collected thirteen of them."

"And I have two."

"More than we need; but I am sure we can enter the retreat of the outlaws wearing their own colors."

"We can try at least, Bill," answered Beaver.

"There is the ranch," said Brad, as they drew in sight of the distant house.

It was a pleasant prairie home, with very ample accommodations, fine buildings and some superb prairie land surrounding it, with plenty of good timber on the creek.

Large vegetable gardens were snugly fenced in, a hennery was upon one side, ample sheds for cattle and corral yards, and in front of the really imposing structure were beds of fragrant flowers, showing the refinement of a woman's hand.

"There's a visitor at the ranch, and on wheels too," said Brad, as he observed wheel-marks leading up to the house.

Soon after the scouts rode up to the door, and out upon the broad porch came Major Buckner, Mrs. Bradford, Captain Tayloe and his brother Andy to receive them, while standing in the doorway was the tall form of the Texan ranger, Captain Ralph Reynolds.

The faces of all were earnest, and they gazed upon the scouts with deep interest and surprise, while Brad shouted:

"Father, auntie, and all, let me introduce to you Captain Wild Bill and his Dead-Shot Pardes, and they are dandies, you bet, and no slouch about them."

The introduction of Brad brought the hats of the Dead Shot Nine off their heads, and dismounting at the major's request, they ascended the steps to the piazza, and the Texan and Captain Tayloe were individually presented by the ranchero, who then said:

"Gentlemen, I am most happy to see you, and especially just now, as my friend, Captain Reynolds, here, commander of the Texas Rangers, was just wishing for a score of good men to start to-night with Captain Tayloe to the fort to get a company of cavalry, for he has news that will interest you."

The Dead Shots gazed at the handsome young Texan with interest, for all had heard of his daring deeds with his Rangers of the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

OFF FOR THE RED OWLS' ROOST.

MRS. BRADFORD having left the piazza, to see about supper, for the sun was just setting, Wild Bill, at the entreaty of Brad, told the story of the capture of Parson Tom, who sat sullenly upon the steps near by.

He was not ironed, but he knew better than to attempt to escape from that party.

The horses of the scouts had been unsaddled and led away to the huge barn, by the major's farm hands, and he had assured them that his house was large enough to accommodate half a dozen more guests than he then had.

In his quiet, modest way Wild Bill then told of Quaker Tom's little plot to ambush them, and of the report brought in by Brad, which caused them to doubt him.

By threats, and promises to spare his life, they

had forced him to tell of the ambush, and then they had arranged to entrap the trap-setters.

With parts of their wardrobes, serapes and lariats, stuffed with prairie grass, they had made up dummies, armed them with sticks cut from some timber, to resemble rifles slung at their backs, and tying them on their horses, and the horses two by two, had set them off for the ambush, they following slowly behind on foot, while Parson Tom had "led his lambs to the slaughter," Wild Bill said.

The scheme, proposed by White Beaver, had proven a grand success, though about a dozen of the Red Owls, with Kent Kennard at their head had escaped.

"He was really their leader then?" asked Captain Tayloe.

"I saw him dash by me, but dropped my revolver, and he was gone before I could use it."

"I recognized him distinctly in the moonlight."

"There is more mystery in all this," said the captain.

"We must clear it up, sir, for that is what we came down to Kansas for," averred Wild Bill.

"You came here for that reason?" asked the major.

"We came, sir, to find your little girl, or rather to prevent her marriage with Kent Kennard."

"Can this be possible?"

"It is, sir, for we meant to prevent her marrying that villain by putting him out of the way."

"But how knew you this?" asked the bewildered major.

"During the Confederate war, Miss Bradford, then a little girl, kept our chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill, from being taken as a spy, and he told her to call on him if ever he could serve her."

"So she wrote him a letter, telling him that she was to be forced to marry this man, and loving another, asked him to save her."

"He was just then ordered on special duty, but came to me, and I came here, with my eight pards, to keep his pledge given to the little girl, and we will stick to the trail until we find the end of it."

"My dear sir, you and your brave comrades are noble men, and God bless you," said Major Buckner, with feeling.

"Make me number ten of your band, for I will gladly follow the leadership of Wild Bill," and the young Texan held forth his hand, which Bill warmly grasped.

"And I number eleven, Bill," called out Captain Tayloe.

"I'm all stove up, or I'd be twelve," said Andy Tayloe.

"I'll take that number, Captain Bill," the major said.

"They say it's an unlucky number, but I'll risk thirteen with this party," cried Brad.

"Well, gentlemen, we certainly have a band of good men," Wild Bill remarked.

"I have ten good cowboys I can spare, all well armed," the major said.

"And Blackstone, my negro servant, is worth a couple of ordinary men, so we count twenty-four for the march, and as a soldier, I will say, ten of those I see before me are equal to a full company of cavalry, so I have no fear of the result, be the Red Owls what they may in numbers."

"Well, Captain Tayloe, as an army officer you are to command the force, the major will take his cowboys, and Captain Reynolds will be the commander of my scouts, while Brad and I act as your aides, and White Beaver is surgeon of the outfit."

"You are most modest, Wild Bill; but it is just like you, hang back until you are needed, and then strike home; but tell us about the capture of Kennard's ranch," said Captain Tayloe.

"Oh, that was a bloodless affair, for White Beaver took it before we got there."

And Wild Bill went on to tell of the capture of the three scouts, the experience of Brad with the Chinese, and his discovery of the underground passageways, his killing of Nosey and the recapture of Bravo buck and his two comrades.

"And what about this woman on horseback, Bill?" asked Captain Tayloe.

"That mystery is to be solved, sir; but she certainly could not be Miss Bradford, for she could only have left the stockade through the underground channels."

"My opinion is that there is some trickery about her, gotten up by Kennard to make fools believe she is a specter and keep them away from his ranch."

"And Miss Bradford?"

"She was doubtless taken at once to his retreat by some of his men, and I am anxious to reach there by the time he does, and Parson Tom there is to show us the place."

"I told yer I didn't know it, thet I had never been thar, havin' always been with ther gang up here, since I joined 'em; but you won't believe me, and I'll have to die, I s'pose, for I doesn't know, I swear I don't," whined the outlaw.

"Don't let that trouble you, Wild Bill, for I will lead you directly to the retreat, as I was there just twenty-four hours ago," said the Texan.

A murmur of pleasure broke from the scouts at this, and then he told his story of the finding of the retreat.

It was decided to start just at dawn, and Major Buckner said that he would see that his half a score of cowboys were ready and extra horses should be taken to replace any animal that might give out.

Mrs. Bradford then came out and invited all in to supper, and such a meal as was prepared the bordermen had not sat down to for many a long day, and each and every one did full justice to the fried chickens, eggs, boiled ham, hot rolls, waffles, coffee and the generous glasses of some of the major's finest old wine.

Retiring early, when all had been arranged for the start, the party started off, after a substantial breakfast, just as the east was growing rosy under the rising sun, just twenty-four in number, including Captain Tayloe's colored soldier.

As for Parson Tom, he was left a prisoner at the ranch, for his services were no longer needed, with the Texan Ranger acting as guide.

"God bless you, preserve you from death, and help you to bring back my poor child," called out Mrs. Bradford, as she stood on the piazza, wafting them a farewell, tears welling up from her heart, and prayers falling from her trembling lips, as she saw the band of heroes ride forth to face danger and death for the sake of her beautiful daughter.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SCENE IN THE OWLS' NEST.

THE valley retreat, discovered so fortunately by Ralph Reynolds, the Texan Ranger, on his way to see his lady-love, was really the secret haunt of the Red Owls.

By liberal presents to the Indians about their retreat they managed to keep on good terms with them, and thus secure a safe hiding-place for their stolen horses and plunder, where few white men dare go on account of the hostility of the red-skins, unless he wore the badge of the Red Owl Rangers, the feather head-dress.

At the barriers a guard was kept at either end of the valley, and the camps were in a glen in the ridge which sheltered them.

There were log cabins back on the hillside, brush sheds for cattle in winter, but the outlaws dwelt in army tents in the summer, and they gave the camp a very military look.

Operating in small bands, far and near, as they had been, the Red Owls had accumulated much plunder, and had never been tracked to their retreat by either Regulators or soldiers.

They had various wagons, ambulances, farm vehicles, buggies, and a carriage or two, with innumerable household furniture and wares.

These were placed in vehicles attended by a few men and a woman or two and children, and driven off as settlers who suddenly wished to sell out and go back East, as they claimed, and good sums were realized thereby.

This game was continually and successfully played, and the treasury of the band was well filled.

The outlaws believed in comforts, too, and luxuries, and, with what they stole in the way of stores and raised in the way of vegetables, they got along well.

There were some forty men, half a dozen women, as many children and a few negroes belonging to the band, say three-score souls all told, and they had a camp commander and a chief over all, who was the planner of their work in the field and seldom visited the retreat.

It is to this strange rendezvous, among these wild people, that I would have my reader now accompany me.

In a large cabin, situated upon the slope of the hill, and commanding a view of the camp, valley and river, with the hills beyond, sat a maiden whom the reader has met before.

She is idly gazing out upon the scene before her, when suddenly a horse dashes up to the door and the rider springs to the ground and walks quickly upon the piazza.

The rider is a woman, one with a sun-browned, handsome face, scarcely more than twenty-five and with the look of one who had known what it was to suffer.

Her form was very graceful in her riding-habit; and her slouch hat, encircled with a gold cord, gave her a jaunty air.

"I have news for you," she said, addressing the one in the cabin.

Rising, she came out upon the piazza and asked coldly:

"Well, what is the news you bear?"

"Captain Kennard will soon be here."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, for his men, some of them, have just come in, and they report that the band was met by Wild Bill, that famous scout, and a number of his comrades, and very badly handled, a number having been killed, and others captured."

"I wish their captain had shared the same fate."

"Not he, for he will soon be here, he having gone to an Indian camp, where is a missionary priest, to have him come here with him, that he may make you his wife."

"God forbid!"

"It is useless for you to go against your fate, girl."

"I tried the same, and see me now, the inmate of an outlaw camp."

"I loved a man, he made me his wife, a rival told him ill of me, and he deserted me without a word."

"I came West in search of him, was shot down on the prairie, when I was looking for him, by a cut-throat who sought my gold."

"A wagon-train came along, and the assassin fled, and I was buried by the settlers, who went on their way."

"The assassin came back, dragged me out of the grave to see if my rings yet remained, and found me alive."

"The bullet had grazed my temple and stunned me only; but I would have died but for his return."

"Just then, as he staggered back in horror a horseman dashed up, fired and the assassin fell dead and was thrown into my grave by my preserver."

"Half unconscious I was carried to a ranch, tenderly nursed, and came to, to find, as I believed, my husband by my side."

"To him I poured forth my story, how I had done no wrong, that it was the work of a rival to part us, and how I had followed him, to be ever near him."

"Then he said:

"What if your husband were an outlaw?"

"I would still cling to him," I answered.

"Through all?"

"Yes, through everything."

"I am not your husband," he said, "but his twin brother, Kent Kennard; but your husband, Kendall Kennard, lives, is well, and is my associate in an outlaw band."

"I remain here at my ranch, to give him points to work on, and he roams the prairie with his men, and commands our retreat in the Indian Territory."

"And you?" asked the maiden, gazing full into the face of the strange woman.

"I came to my husband here, and have been with him ever since."

"And the man that kidnapped me and brought me here?"

"Was my husband, serving as his brother, at his request."

"And Kent Kennard?"

"Left Prairie City to go to the Indian camp and get the priest I spoke of, and bring him here."

"Was it he who met the scouts?"

"No, it was my husband."

"How strangely alike they are."

"Startlingly so in appearance."

"In wickedness too," was the reply of Belle Bradford.

"You will learn to love him and forget his misdeeds."

"Never the one or the other, and I cannot believe that I will be forced into this marriage, and I appeal to you, as a woman, to save me."

"I can do nothing, for Kent is chief, my husband his lieutenant."

"I went to his ranch a few nights ago, to ask him to spare you; it was then I was chased by a boy, your brother you told me, and afterward by a scout, and escaped to the ranch; but I found Kent was not there, so left by the secret way and returned here."

"Kent is determined to marry you, my husband just told me, for he has seen him since your capture, and there is no hope to escape it."

"Heaven have mercy! there he comes now!"

"Which is it, Kent or Kendall Kennard?" asked the woman.

"Kent Kennard."

"You are mistaken; it is my husband."

As she spoke a horseman rode up and dismounted.

Certainly it did look like Captain Kent Kennard; but just then, coming up the valley, accompanied by a priest, was Kent Kennard himself, and poor Belle groaned in agony of spirit as she saw him, while the woman said:

"I am sorry, but there is no hope for you, Miss Bradford, for I know the will of the man who intends to make you his wife."

CHAPTER XL.

THE OUTLAW CHIEF'S SECRET.

WHEN Kendall Kennard reached the piazza he greeted his wife affectionately and bowed to Belle Bradford, while he said:

"I hope your stay has not been unpleasant, Miss Bradford."

"How could it be otherwise, sir, when I am forced to associate with outlaws?"

"You are severe; but here comes my brother, and you must visit upon him, not me, your reproach, for I but carried out his commands."

In a little while Kent Kennard approached accompanied by the priest, a good-faced, deaf

old man, who was devoting his life to converting red-skins and succeeding poorly.

Kent Kennard bowed low to Belle, kissed his sister-in-law, introduced the priest to the ladies and then led him to his room, himself retiring to the piazza.

"I had to wait for the old fellow a couple of days, as he was off on some religious trail in the hills," he said, with a laugh.

And turning to Belle, he said:

"I did not expect, Miss Bradford, that I would have to have you kidnapped to make you my wife, but it was so."

"And you intend to force me into this alliance with you?"

"Oh, yes; but we will discuss that after awhile, for I have much to say to you."

"Now, Ken, tell me how it was you got such a thrashing from those scouts."

"Treachery, brother, for Quaker Tom betrayed us."

And he told the story of the ambush.

"This was most unfortunate; but Wild Bill and his men are terrible fellows, for they are in possession of my ranch, you know, have defeated you against big odds, and we must look out for him."

"How many men have you in camp?"

"About twenty, but others are out, fully half as many, for in our flight we scattered everywhere, and they'll drop in."

"Well, as soon as I have made Miss Bradford my wife, I shall take the trail of Wild Bill, and I'll run him to earth, for he must be gotten rid of, or he'll be down on us here before we can get rid of our plunder and horses."

"And then, brother?"

"Why, we must give up outlawry, and turn to mining, you know."

"Now, Miss Bradford, let me say to you what I wish, and before my brother and his wife," and he turned to Belle, with the cynical smile on his face that seemed to play there always when he was deeply moved.

"As you please, sir," was the cold reply.

"In the first place, I wish to say that you are aware that I hold a secret of your family?"

"I am."

"Do you know what it is?"

"Not exactly, I am free to confess."

"Well, Miss Bradford, unless you promise to become my wife, this night, without making a fuss about it, so as to win that priest to your side, for he thinks this a settlers' camp, I will have your father hanged!"

"My father! Why, he is dead!" gasped Belle.

"You are mistaken; he was reported dead, but he is alive."

"Oh God!"

"It is true, and he is now dwelling in Colorado, nothing more than my prisoner, though he is free to go as he pleases there."

"Your father, Miss Bradford, was an officer in the Confederate army, and he entered the Union lines as a spy."

"It is not true!"

"It is."

"My father went into the Union lines to see his dying sister, and was shot; such was told me."

"He was taken as a spy, had papers upon him which condemned him, was tried and sentenced to be hanged."

"He made his escape, was fired upon when crossing the river, and was seen to sink."

"But he did not sink, was not hurt, and escaped."

"He dared not return home, the war was ending, and so he came West, to Colorado, becoming a miner."

"Your mother knows he is not dead, your uncle knows it, and they are aware that I aided him in his escape and sent him West."

"They know that I am aware of where he is, and that I have but to give his name, and whereabouts, at an army post, to have a squad of soldiers sent for him, and the sentence of death by hanging, carried out upon him."

"Now this is the secret I hold, Miss Bradford, so I ask you will you be my wife, or shall I give your father to the gallows?"

"I will marry you," came in a voice that quivered with anguish.

"You pledge yourself to this?"

"I do."

"Another thing, Miss Bradford."

"Well, sir?"

"Your father has struck it rich; in other words he has found a mine of gold that will make him trebly a millionaire, and you are his heiress."

"When you are my wife, we will go to him, and when you have made him give to me one-half interest in his mine, I will release you from your galling bonds, for I wish no woman for a wife who hates me."

"Gladly will I do this," cried Belle Bradford, the tears of joy coming into her beautiful eyes.

"But where is my father?" she asked.

"At a mining-camp in Colorado known as the Cathedral, and he goes under the name Buck Bradley, and Crusoe, for his beard and hair are long and nearly white."

"My poor, poor father!"

"Now, Miss Bradford, neither your mother or

uncle know where he is, all their communications having been through me, and when you have carried out my wishes, I will set you free."

"Now Lucille, or Lady Lucy as the boys used to call you, give us a supper, a wedding-feast as it were."

The woman arose and left the piazza, and Belle quickly followed her, her heart throbbing with emotion.

As they departed, Kent Kennard said:

"There come a pack of our Red Owls now, Ken!"

"Yes, they are the boys I had with me, for I recognize their horses," and their eyes were turned upon a party of horsemen, eleven in number who were riding leisurely up the valley toward the camp, and still wearing their Red Owl masks.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE PLEDGE KEPT.

"THEY are coming right up to report to us, Ken," said Kent Kennard, alluding to the eleven horsemen who were now near the headquarters cabin and coming directly toward it.

"Great God! what does that mean?" cried Kendall Kennard, as shouts and shots were heard down the valley, and a dozen horsemen were seen charging into the outlaw camps.

Instantly all but four of the horsemen near the cabin wheeled about and dashed back toward the camp.

But those four came on, and dashing up before the piazza, threw themselves from their horses, while they quickly dragged from their heads the red feather masks they wore.

A wild cry broke from the lips of the twin brothers, and they dropped their hands upon their weapons, for they recognized Wild Bill, Ralph Reynolds, the Texan, whom they had known in war days, and Captain Tayloe, while White Beaver made up the fourth.

"You are my prisoner, Kent Kennard!" shouted the Texan, springing toward the chief.

"And you are mine, sir!" said Wild Bill, as he faced the twin brother.

But the brothers answered by firing, and both the Texan and Wild Bill were wounded, though lightly, while their shots brought the outlaws down, the chief wounded fatally, the other dropping dead.

In an instant Ralph Reynolds was kneeling by his side.

"Tell me where Belle Bradford is, or I'll drag you up to yonder tree, wounded as you are!"

"The lady is there, sir!" was the sneering response, and out of the house dashed Belle Bradford and the outlaw's wife.

With a wild shriek the outlaw wife threw herself upon the body of her husband, while the maiden sprung forward and was grasped in the arms of her lover.

"Curse you both, take my dying blessing!" shouted Kent Kennard, as he lay prostrate on the piazza, and he drew from his bosom a revolver and leveled it.

But ere he could draw trigger there came a shot, and a bullet shattered his arm.

It was fired by White Beaver, who with Wild Bill had mounted his horse, the two dashing to aid their comrades, leaving the Texan and Captain Tayloe to hold the cabin, knowing they could well do it against ordinary odds.

Into the *mêlée* dashed the two scouts, and in a moment more the fight had ended, the outlaw camp was taken, and a score of Red Owl Rangers had been either killed, wounded or captured.

But the attacking party had also suffered, as Buck Bravo and two of the Buckner Ranch cowboys had fallen, and half a dozen others had been wounded, among them being Brad, who had covered himself with glory.

But, unmindful of the slight gash on his shoulder, the brave boy was dashing away at full speed to greet his cousin whom he saw on the piazza, and his father followed rapidly behind him, while the Surgeon Scout looked after friends and foes alike.

CHAPTER XLII.

CONCLUSION.

AWAY from the dead body of her husband the poor outlaw's wife was drawn by Belle Bradford's gentle hand and words of sympathy were offered her.

But she refused to be comforted, and went off alone to mourn her dead.

Kent Kennard died a few moments after the shot from White Beaver that broke his arm and saved the life of Belle Bradford, perhaps of her lover, too, and the brothers were borne away and buried in the same grave.

Wild Bill then volunteered to remain as a guard in the camp with his men until Captain Tayloe returned to the fort and brought his company of cavalry after the prisoners and booty, and the Texan, with Belle and her uncle and Brad and the cowboys for an escort, started off the next day for Buckner Ranch.

They were also accompanied by Lucille, the bandit's wife, who said she would return to the East, and Brad escorted her into Prairie City,

where she took the Overland stage going eastward, and nothing was ever heard of her afterward.

Remaining at the outlaw camp, the Surgeon Scout served well the wounded, while the old priest did his duty, too, performing the service for the dead instead of the marriage ceremony.

When Captain Tayloe returned with the soldiers, both infantry and cavalry, the Dead Shots started on the trail for the North, and halting a night on the way at Buckner Ranch, they had the pleasure of witnessing the marriage of Belle Bradford to Captain Ralph Reynolds.

The latter had just returned from Colorado, and he was not alone, for back with him came a fine old gentleman whom Belle called father, and to whom, some months after, Captain Tayloe sent a pardon from the President.

As for Brad, he was the happiest boy in America the day of the wedding, and he is now an officer in the —th cavalry, stationed out on the frontier, and no more dashing man ever drew a sword than he, and he never tires of talking over with his scout comrades the days when they kept the pledge, made by the author of this over true tale, to a young girl, and run to earth the Red Owls of Kansas.

THE END.

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